"Congratulations, Hitler Will Run Forever!"[1]
The Role of the Holocaust in American Jewish Humor 1945-1970

Undergraduate Research Thesis

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[1] *The Producers,* Directed by Mel Brooks, Los Angeles: Embassy Pictures, 1967.

Chapter 1: What's the Deal with American Jewish Humor?

"A woman on a train walked up to a man across the table. "Excuse me," she said, "but are you Jewish?"
"No," replied the man.
A few minutes later the woman returned. "Excuse me," she said again, "are you sure you're not Jewish?"
"I'm sure," said the man.
But the woman was not convinced, and a few minutes later she approached him a third time.
"Are you absolutely sure you're not Jewish?" she asked.
"All right, all right," the man said. "You win. I'm Jewish."
"That's funny," said the woman. "You don't look Jewish.""

This joke symbolically exemplifies the process of detecting Jewish comedy within the greater context of American entertainment. Just as the woman on the train notices the non-Jewish-looking Jewish man but has little proof to substantiate her assumption, one will find similar contradictions in the constitution of a Jewish joke. A joke may not "look Jewish" but originate from a Jewish comedian. A self-deprecating quip may seem Jewish in nature and yet emanate from a non-Jewish source. Indeed, the academic world contains no shortage of scholarship on Jewish comedy. This cultural phenomenon has nestled itself among the works of literary scholars, sociologists, psychologists, historians, and even comedians themselves. They endlessly argue what constitutes as Jewish comedy, where it came from, what inspired it, and what sets it apart from conventional humor.

Though the following chapters focus on a niche phenomenon in modern American Jewish humor, an academic investigation of this history requires a minimal outline of what qualifies as Jewish comedy.[2] While some scholars trace Jewish humor to ancient Jewish scripture, labeling traditions such as the Purim spiel as humorous, it is hard to prove that the people's unique

[2] Throughout this work, the terms 'Jewish comedy,' 'Yiddish comedy,' and 'Old World Comedy' will be used interchangeably to refer to this type of humor.

relationship with comedy is as old as the religion itself.[3] Few can overlook, however, the plethora of cultural productions that constituted the Jewish humor born in the Old World shtetls of Eastern Europe. Indeed, American Jewish historical studies often trace the phenomenon of American Jewish humor to this Ashkenazi tradition. This tradition includes tales of the tragically idiotic "Der Khelmer Khachamin" (The Wise Men of Chelm) and the witty stories of author Sholem Aleichem.[4] But even this temporal root requires greater elaboration. Psychologist Sigmund Freud once defined Jewish comedy solely by its dependence on "self-mockery."[5] Philosopher Ted Cohen believes that Jewish humor is "the humor of outsiders" and is based in "logic and language."[6] Jeremy Dauber lists several characteristics of Jewish humor that are often contradictory. He argues that academics have simultaneously qualified Jewish humor as "bookish and witty" and "vulgar and body-obsessed" or "metaphysically oriented" and "focused on the folksy, and every day."[7] Historian Stephen Whitfield emphasizes that Jewish humor encourages the exercise of the mind and the palpable use of the Yiddish language and its idioms.[8] However, almost all agree that Jewish humor, whether in its self-mockery or satirized realism, is a source of psychological salvation for this nation.[9]

This thesis will take a temporally and thematically concentrated approach to American Jewish humor. In the spirit of the theoretically prevalent relationship between Jewish comedy and oppression, I intend to investigate how the Holocaust, an inarguably catastrophic event in

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[3] Stephen J. Whitfield, "The Distinctiveness of American Jewish Humor," *Modern Judiasm* 6, no 3 (October 1986): 252.
[4] Sarah Blacher Cohen, "Introduction: The Varieties of Jewish Humor," in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1987), 2.
[5] Dan Ben-Amos, "The Myth of Jewish Humor," *Western Folklore* 32, no. 2 (April 1973): 112.
[6] Jordan Finkin, "Jewish Jokes, Yiddish Storytelling, and Sholem Aleichem: A Discursive Approach," in *Jews and Humor*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2011), 86.
[7] Jeremy Dauber, *Jewish Comedy, a Serious History,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), XIV.
[8] Whitfield, "The Distinctiveness of American Jewish Humor," 252.
[9] Cohen, "The Varieties of Jewish Humor," 4.

modern history, affected American Jewish humor in the 1950s and 1960s. Many academic works discuss the "Yiddishization" of mid 20th century American humor, commending Sid Caesar and Lenny Bruce for their influential work in Jewish comedy throughout this period.[10] Others, comment on the unique Jewish ubiquity of American humor, as by 1979, Jews made up 80 percent of all professional comedians, even though Jews barely accounted for 3 percent of the total American population.[11] The influence of the Holocaust, however, rarely functions as a primary research lens. While Jewish historian Avinoam Patt has researched Jewish humor in the aftermath of the Holocaust, his work concentrates on the European narrative of survivors.[12] Most historians who research the American Jewish experience in the immediate years after the Holocaust do not directly concentrate on the function of comedy. This cavity in the historiography is particularly evident in Hasia R. Diner's book, *We Remember with Reverence and with Love* and Kirsten Fermaglich's *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares*.[13] Both follow the unprecedented cultural journey of American Jews as they dealt with the catastrophic legacy of the Holocaust, but fail to explore the vital legacy of comedy in this journey.[14] In my effort to synthesize these previously separate concentrations in modern American Jewish history, I offer a chronological approach that explores the comic precedent, immediate aftereffects, radical rebirth, and long-lasting legacy of the Holocaust as a conscious and subconscious stimulus in American Jewish humor. This timetable highlights how the presence of the Holocaust in American Jewish

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[10] Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny,* (New York City: Pantheton, 2003), 99.
[11] Joseph Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture,* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 39.
[12] Avinoam Patt, "'Laughter Through Tears:' Jewish Humor in the Aftermath of the Holocaust" in *A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World*, ed. Eli Lederhendler, Gabriel N. Finder, (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2016). 113.
[13] Preeminent texts on Holocaust remembrance written in the last ten years
[14] Hasia R. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and with Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence After the Holocaust, 1945-1962*, (New York, New York University Press, 2009); Kirsten Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957-1965,* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2006).

comedy functioned as a veiled and often nonexistent topic, a comic platform for political criticism, and eventually a form of Holocaust memorialization. However, the recent over-saturation of Holocaust humor has enhanced the tragedy's already varying comic symbolism, barring the practice from a common and readily identifiable objective.

The Ashkenazi Precedent to American Jewish Comedy

Jewish humor arrived in the United States with the 1,300,000 immigrants who fled discrimination and their homes in the late 19th century.[15] Approximately eighty percent of the Eastern European Jews who left their homelands selected America as their destination. This migration forced Jews to reexamine and apply their comic tradition to a new environment.[16] Though no longer plagued by pogroms upon their arrival to the United States, Jewish migrants encountered poor physical conditions, anonymity, and poverty. American Jewish historian Rebecca Kobrin argues that the culture of the Eastern European city functioned as a cultural contract that tempered the reality of these conditions in the United States.[17] This mentality likely extended to the sarcastic, self-deprecating comic tradition, which for centuries, had tempered the trauma of discrimination in the Pale of Settlement. In their new homes on the Lower East Side, Jewish migrants preserved their Old World humor as a form of nostalgia.[18] Their descendants, adopting and eventually adjusting their elders' Yiddish quirks, cultures, and "haunted [smiles]," brought that humor to the stage.[19] This evolution tied the fate of American Jewish humor with the history of Yiddish performance both in Eastern Europe and the United States.

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[15] Cohen, "The Varieties of Jewish Humor," 7.
[16] Ioan Davies, "Lenny Bruce: Hyperrealism and the Death of Jewish Tragic Humor." *Social Text*, no. 22 (1989): 95.
[17] Rebecca Kobrin. "The Shtetl by the Highway: The East European City in New York's Landsmanshaft Press, 1921-39." *Prooftexts* 26, no. 1-2 (2006): 109.
[18] Ibid., 115.
[19] Lawrence Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America,* (New York, Public Affairs, 2001), x.

The initial early 20th century renaissance of Jewish humor in American Yiddish theaters was among the many consequences of mass migration and resettlement, as it symbolized a remnant of Eastern European Jewish life. Understanding this cultural facet of the Eastern European narrative remains vital to comprehending its American memorialization. In their previous lives in the Pale of Settlement, the majority of Eastern European Jews experienced a consistent surrounding of Jewish influence. Those enclosed within these severed communities, largely worshipped with their rabbis, studied Jewish scripture, and practiced Jewish culture.[20] Jews who escaped these Pale of Settlement rabbinical societies reestablished themselves in urban Eastern European neighborhoods and often embraced radical anti-regime ideals. These divergent populations of the same religion both contributed to the development of Eastern European Jewish humor. This 19th century "half in the past and half in the future" condition developed Yiddish literature and theaters, the main platforms of Yiddish humor.[21] Affected by this simultaneity, writers and entertainers jeered at the unique traditions embraced and violence faced by these Eastern European Jewish populations.

This emerging theatrical comic tradition failed to maintain a sedentary life, as the assassination of Tsar Alexander II prompted a rise of anti-Semitism. His son, Tsar Alexander III sponsored organized attacks on Russian Jews and eventually passed the May Laws in 1882, which severely curtailed economic and political opportunities for Russian Jews.[22] In 1883, Russian authorities banned Jewish entertainment. Eastern European Jews could no longer sustain their all-encompassing Jewish environments. As migration became the sole solution,

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[20] Hasia Diner, *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 46.
[21] Irving Howe, "The Nature of Jewish Laughter," in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1987), 19.
[22] Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 6.

Jews did not forget the culture of these Eastern European cities. Upon their arrival to the United States, Jewish migrants rebuilt not only their personal lives but the souls of these deserted communities. Crowded in tenements on the Lower East Side, the Jewish population of New York City soared to 1.2 million by 1920. To cope with the harsh physical realities of migration, they reestablished the cultural and religious idealizations of their past lives in a new location.[23] These immigrants reestablished their language, kosher butcher shops, synagogues, and finally, their literary and performative comic culture within the greater context of their new American lives.[24]

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the reestablished Yiddish theaters on American soil provided Jewish immigrants with entertainment. Understanding that these immigrants largely settled and worked on the Lower East Side, the first Yiddish troupes performed at New York City's geographically accessible Bowery Gardens. Starting as a cottage industry in these auditoria, Yiddish theaters in the United States eventually entertained thousands of people per week.[25] In the year 1900, the three most popular Yiddish theaters sold over two million tickets combined.[26] These playhouses provided not only entertainment, but also social and even religious opportunity for Jewish immigrants. Musical and comic performers adapted the music of the synagogue and the stories of the Torah to songs, humorous monologues, and melodrama. Music historian Irene Heskes explains that these cultural elements of the Yiddish theater allowed Jewish audiences, confronted with the isolation of migration, to maintain a connection with their

[23] Kobrin, "The Shtetl by the Highway,"109.
[24] Diner, *New Promised Land,* 47
[25] Irene Heskes. "Music as Social History: American Yiddish Theater Music, 1882-1920." *American Music* 2, no. 4 (1984): 73.
[26] Edna Nahshon, "Overture: From the Bowery to Broaway" in *New York's Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway,* ed. Edna Nahshon (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2016), 12.

heritage.[27] And though the Yiddish theater also catered to dramatic and musical entertainment, it also nursed America's first generation of Jewish comics.

In the United States, the Yiddish theater simultaneously preserved Old World humor and inaugurated American Jewish performative comedy. While some Bowery Garden performances on the Lower East Side showcased dance and music, others highlighted comedy and farce.[28] Actors on the New York Yiddish stage engaged in improvisation and integrated comic "shticks" in their plays, which included physical humor, cross-dressing, and musical comedy. [29] Though originally appealing to Jewish audiences, these improvised, and often musical, humorous performance began to project a widespread appeal.

In the beginning, Yiddish theaters sought patronage from the immigrant Jewish community. Performing in Yiddish, Jewish comics made fun of their fellow Jews to a Jewish audience.[30] These theaters, however, found a developing audience among non-Jewish Americans. Additionally, second generation performers commanded the Yiddish language less and less, forcing performances to occasionally incorporate the English language.[31] Detecting their growing appeal, the theaters' greatest entertainers expanded their talents to general American entertainment, widening their audience from merely Jewish communities to a broader American public.[32] In the words of literary scholar Lawrence J. Epstein, Jewish performers "[smuggled] Jewish humor into an accepted vaudeville format."[33] This trend is evident in the comic musical productions of Irving Berlin. Though now produced in English rather than

[27] Heskes, "Music as Social History," 75.
[28]Michael C. Steinlauf. Theater: Yiddish Theater. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. 2010. https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Theater/Yiddish_Theater.
[29] Nahshon, "Bowery to Broadway," 30.
[30] Ibid., 22.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Heskes, "Music as Social History," 86.
[33] Epstein, *Haunted Smile,* 24

Yiddish, his songs "Cohen Owes Me Ninety Seven Dollars" and "Sadie Salome Go Home," presented in vaudeville theaters, respectively teased at Jewish stereotypes of stinginess and Jewish romantic relationships.[34] Performers such as Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker used their songs to introduce Yiddish terminology to their newly established mainstream American audiences.[35] The Marx Brothers traversed from street performances to the vaudeville stage to Broadway and film, and Jack Benny transitioned from a life of Jewish Orthodoxy, to vaudeville, and to the spotlight of comedic radio and Hollywood fame. [36]

As these comic celebrities transitioned their comic platforms, the stage began to compete, albeit in vain, with radio, television and records as the dominant platform of humor.[37] With these accessible media forms, audiences diversified and the concept of a purely Jewish audience for Jewish humor became a local phenomenon. Jewish humor had to expand its applicability. But even when faced with the non-Jewish audiences of more technologically advanced show businesses, the Jewish narrative remained present in America's massified entertainment. Beth Wenger argues that Jewish entertainers, and particularly comedians, used the Jewish migration experience to appeal to and involve populations that also experienced migration, assimilation, and generational conflict in the United States.[38] These themes featured prominently in the popular American entertainment of the post-Yiddish theater generation. Alan Crosland's famous film *The Jazz Singer*, which followed the religious struggles of a Jewish Cantor's son, attracted millions. In the 1930s, Gertrude Berg's radio show, "The Rise of the Goldbergs," filled living

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[34] Irving Berlin. "Cohen Owes me Ninety Seven Dollars."1915; Irving Berlin and Edgar Leslie, "Sadie Salome Go Home," 1909.
[35] Joseph Dorinson, *Kvetching and Shpritzing*: Jewish Humor in American Popular Culture, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2015), 44.
[36] Leonard M. Helfgott, "Groucho Harpo, Chico, and Karl: Immigrant Humor and the Depression," in *Jews and Humor* ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon (West Lafayette: Purde University Press, 2011), 107.
[37] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 17.
[38] Beth S. Wenger. *The Jewish Americans: Three Centuries of Jewish Voices in America,* (New York: Doublesday, 2007), 203.

rooms across the country five nights a week.[39] Though these episodes featured a clearly Jewish family that rejoiced in Jewish holidays, the storylines reflected experiences applicable to most middle-class American families. She gossiped with her neighbors and tempered family dynamics. The show's protagonist, Molly Goldberg, embodied the American dream as she adjusted her ethnic tradition to life in the United States.[40] Producers and performers, in order to succeed, clearly coupled Jewish influence with national accessibility.

Though the expression of one's Judaism varied by comedian and by their chosen entertainment platform, Jewish Americans had carved a clear role in the evolution of modern American comic entertainment. As Jewish humor dissipated in the depleting shtetels of Eastern Europe, it flourished in the United States. Jewish immigrants contributed celebrities, financiers, and writers to the evolution of theater, radio, and film in the United States. At the peak of this permeation in the late 1920s, American Jews encountered a reoccurrence of anti-Semitism, both at home and abroad, that subsequently curtailed the ultimate boldness of American Jewish humor.

The Eve of the Holocaust

Though the aforementioned protagonists of early American Jewish mainstream comedy, such as Gertrude Berg, Jack Benny, and the Marx Brothers, initially enjoyed popularity, shifting international and domestic circumstances began to restrict that flamboyancy. The disturbing effects of World War I and the Great Depression catered to American isolationist sentiments and suspicion towards those who might betray that stance. American Jewry often claimed a singular experience in the United States that remained relatively free of intense European persecution.[41]

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[39]Diner, *A New Promised Land,* 75
[40] Wenger, *The Jewish Americans,* 247.
[41] David Sorkin. "Is American Jewry Exceptional? Comparing Jewish Emancipation in Europe and America." *American Jewish History* 96, no. 3 (2010): 175.

But looming anti-Semitism in the United States, which emerged in the unstable, apprehensive decades of the 1920s and 1930s, began to contradict that claim.[42] Increased American skepticism towards outsiders largely affected populations already on the margins of society, subsequently curbing the emerging Jewish personality of American entertainment, and more importantly, its comedy.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, America experienced an intense period of anti-Semitism fueled by the political and economic crises of the interwar years and the Great Depression. No shortage of events occurred throughout these two decades that encouraged this American Jewish timidity. A 1938 poll found that 50 percent of Americans had a negative opinion of their Jewish peers.[43] The prejudiced sentiments of Roman Catholic priest Father Charles Coughlin, who attributed the Great Depression to the Jews, inspired gangs to desecrate synagogues across the nation.[44] Though American anti-Semitism functioned to a degree of exceptionalism when compared to Europe's deeply bigoted history towards Jews, the Red Scare and Palmer Raids gestured to the fragility of this uniqueness. In the entertainment world, the frenzied panic surrounding these increased incidents of bigotry encouraged Jewish people to "lie low" and disguise their Jewish heritage and personas.[45]

Within the Jewish community itself, many geographic and religious conditions that fused America's late 19th century wave of Jewish migrants together began to dissipate. The early 20th century accommodated growing Jewish secularization as second-generation immigrants lacked Jewish ties to Eastern Europe and had yet to form a cohesive American Jewish identity.[46] The

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[42] Diner, Promised Land, 80.
[43] Diner, *New Promised Land*, 80.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1995), 212.
[46] Wenger, *The Jewish Americans*, 202.

humor that once assuaged a traumatic transition for first generation American Jews, became a "straightjacket" for their children.[47] Yiddish theater, whose national flourish wore out by the late 1920s, no longer amassed Yiddish-speaking Jewish communities who required performances that echoed the Old World.[48] Irving Berlin's humorous 'Cohens' and 'Sadies Salomes' turned into the 1938 nationalist classic "God Bless America," and his nostalgic 1942 melody, "White Christmas."[49] Producers encouraged Jewish writers and actors to change their names. Though some resisted, actors such as Julius Garfinkle and Emanuel Goldberg became Jules Garfield and Edward G. Robinson.[50] A greater fraction of Jews shied from institutions subject to public scrutiny, such as politics and entertainment. The communities that first generation immigrants once reconstructed to evoke the cultural homogenous village of the Pale Settlement began to simultaneously assimilate and suppress their heritage.

Therefore, as elegantly stated by Henry Feingold, "on the eve of the Holocaust, American Jewry discovered it was no longer, if it ever really had been, a community able to speak to power with one voice."[51] Though Feingold's statement refers to political activism, it holds truth in the world of entertainment. American Jewish humor represented a microcosm of Feingold's observation. The previous decade forced Jewish entertainers to shed their Yiddish accents and self-deprecating quips to varying degrees in an effort to maintain their popularity among Christian American audiences. When news of the Holocaust reached the American Jewish population, it did not arrive to homogenous Yiddish theaters in Jewish tenements that could, in classic Eastern European Jewish spirit, transform tragedy into comedy. On the contrary, the

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[47] Ioan Davies. "Lenny Bruce: Hyperrealism," 92.
[48] Henry L. Feingold, *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust.* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 214.
[49] Wenger, The Jewish Americans, 203.
[50] Diner, *New Promised Land,* 81.
[51] Feingold, *Bearing Witness,* 12.

receivers consisted of largely second or third generation Jewish citizens who had lost the linguistic and geographical binding that united their parents and grandparents.

Without these local ties and audiences to support Yiddish theaters and live performances, the Jewish comic legacy of the war years subsisted best in the world of film and radio. Though Charlie Chaplin's 1940 film *The Great Dictator* remains the most popular reconceptualization of the atrocities of World War II through a humorous lens, Chaplin did not possess the secondary lens of a Jewish comedian. In 1942, Ernst Lubitsch's comedy film, *To Be or Not to Be,* finally contributed this perspective. His film portrayed not only the Polish World War II experience, but also featured a character who never identified as Jewish but remained clearly so, as evident by his humorously dramatic obsession with the Merchant of Venice and his namesake of "Greenberg."[52] Though the topic of concentration camps crept into Jack Benny's infamous Nazi guise of "Concentration Camp Erhard," any larger discussion on Jews and the Holocaust remained absent from the film. Even the clearly Jewish Greenberg, after surrendering to the Nazis and reciting an emotional rendition of Shakespeare's "Hath not a Jew" speech, received no clear ending. He disappeared with no explanation. A lack of closure for this character, who likely became one of Poland's millions of Holocaust victims, mirrors this absence of popular and unified dialogue in the United States on the fate of European Jews.[53] Mirroring Feingold's claim on a lack of Jewish unity, Lubitsch's veiled references to the Jewish fate in the Holocaust did not present an artistic trend.

Radio programming witnessed a general depletion of American Jewish comic content that targeted widespread American audiences. *The Rise of the Goldbergs* which continued to air through 1946 proved one of the few exceptions to this trend. Gertrude Berg's program continued

[52] *To Be or Not to Be*. Directed by Ernst Lubitsch. United Artists, 1942.
[53] Ibid.

to emphasize her Jewish identity throughout the war. Her content even dared allude to the horrors of *Kristallnacht* and family members fleeing atrocities in Europe.[54] Jack Benny also proved a similar exception. Though Benny's primary involvement with Lubitsch's film already gestured to his ethnic pride, he continued his comic efforts and Jewish influence on radio. Taking on a patriotic role throughout the war, Benny participated in several international USO tours that sought to provide morale for American troops. In 1945, he frequented occupied Germany. Though the content of Benny's humor at these USO performances did not reflect his Jewish heritage, his memoirs affirm that the Holocaust continually occupied his thoughts during these performances.[55]

Most mentions of Judaism or the war abroad veered away from comedy as a whole and towards the dramatic. A WNYC, or New York Public Radio, broadcast sponsored by The United States government, featured a production titled "This is Our Enemy." This docu-drama series was broadcast between 1942 and 1943 and featured dramatic reenactments of Axis Power's criminal activities abroad. These episodes functioned as "dramatic enactments of a year's worth of 'enemy' activity in the European and Pacific Theater of war." They highlighted the monologues of little boys in the role of starving Polish children and weeping female voices posing as Greek mothers begging for food.[56] These tragedies, however, did not allot a particular focus to the Jewish experience. The show's archived episodes contained a singular Jewish-themed installment, broadcast in 1943, which portrayed a Jewish man claiming that his people were locked in ghettos and sent to camps.[57] This broadcast, however, remained a singularity in

[54] Wenger, The Jewish Americans, 208.
[55] James Graham Wilson. "Jack Benny and America's Mission after World War II: Openness, Pluralism, Internationalism, and Supreme Confidence." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2011, pp. 338.
[56] The Max and Frieda Weinstein Archive of YIVO Sound Recordings. Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, New York City.
[57] Ibid.

the series, revealing that the Holocaust was not at the forefront of the mainstream entertainment regarding the war. Comedy did not have a place in these features, with the exception of brief impersonations of Adolf Hitler. These episodes played to the melodramatic side of entertainment, using these horrifying tales to agitate paranoia and, therefore, support for American involvement in the war. The war years did not provide Jewish comedians with a stable comic precedent for addressing the Holocaust in the post-war era.

The end of the war presented American Jewish comedians with myriad questions. Though knowledge of the Holocaust did not likely affect their every joke or performance, it remained a haunting circumstance that touched the religious and social behaviors of many American Jews. The following chapters will investigate how the Holocaust played a significant and often overlooked role in the content of Jewish comedians in the United States throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Chapter Two will focus on both the mainstream and underground comedians who navigated the fate of Jewish comedy in the immediate post-war years and the 1950s. Chapter Three will explore Lenny Bruce as a transitional figure between the disjointed Jewish comedy of the 1950s and the intense "Yiddishization" that characterized humor in the 1960s. Chapter Four will investigate how the revitalization of Jewish content in mainstream American entertainment affected the introduction of the Holocaust into 1960s "Yiddishized" American comedy. Finally, Chapter Five will conclude with the legacy of the Holocaust in late 20th and early 21st century American humor.

Chapter 2: Mostly Dead? Mostly Dead Means Slightly Alive: The Jewish Comic Tradition of the 1950s

When Irving Kristol, the managing editor of *The Commentary,*[58] asked his readers, "is Jewish humor dead?" in 1951, one cannot help but wonder how this query related to American Jewish comedy in that decade. Kristol referred to the European Jewish population when he proclaimed "Jewish humor died with its humorists when the Nazis killed off the Jews of Eastern Europe."[59] Though others writers noticed a difference in post-War Yiddish comedy, Kristol was one of the few who posed this query in the context of the Holocaust. He emphasized the prophylactic role Jewish humor had played in times of intense discrimination. Based on this reasoning, the Holocaust should have inspired a commensurate surge in comedy.[60] But with the Holocaust six years behind him, Kristol wrote that Jews could not transform into humor an experience as colossal as genocide. The "world [was] numbed by the enormity of the crime" and "the victims themselves [could not] respond with the aesthetic freedom" of Eastern European wit.[61] The Nazi murder of six million Jews doomed Jewish humor to throw "bitter thrusts at the idiocy of their oppressors."[62] In Kristol's eyes, the Holocaust ruptured Jewish comedy by depriving the Jews of their ability to make fun of tragedy.

In this chapter I will expand Kristol's approach to consider the fate of post-War Jewish American comedy. Prominent historians and essayists writing in the 1970s and 1980s christened the 1950s as the Golden Age of Jewish life, a designation that included Jewish comedy.[63] Due to this idealization of the 1950s, some historians have glossed over the lived experience of the

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[58] A Magazine published by the American Jewish Committee
[59] Irving Kristol. "Is Jewish Humor Dead? The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Joke." *Commentary* (January 1951), 431.
[60] Blacher Cohen, "Introduction." 8.
[61] Kristol, "Is Jewish Humor Dead?"432.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Albert Goldman, "Laughtermakers" in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor,* ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1987), 7.

decade. Though post-Holocaust suburbanization caused American anti-Semitism to fade, it did not generate a social utopia. Historians, such as Hasia Diner, have productively pushed back at the "Golden Age" mythology in the political and cultural reality of 1950s American Jewry.[64] In the 1950s, the early success of Jewish humor among American audiences faltered in the post-War environment. While American Jews gained many economic and social victories in the 1950s, the period's Jewish comedians reveal the price they paid in authenticity.

Many circumstances of American Jewish life had changed since the days of vaudeville that instigated a discord in the American legacy of Jewish humor. With the ever-growing rate of suburbanization, Jews fled crowded tenements in the Bronx and lower East Side to two-story homes with bright green lawns often adjacent to their Christian neighbors.[65] McCarthyism bloomed on the country's political fringes, often targeting Jewish people long associated with socialist beliefs. American Jews abandoned their geographic cultural enclaves and shrouded their political beliefs.[66] But Kristol, without investigating American comedy in particular, reminds historians that the Holocaust also contributed to the lack of perceptibly Jewish comedy broadcast to American audiences in the 1950s.

The Holocaust also affected many Jewish Americans. Decades of historiography have characterized this community's fractured response to the Holocaust. Though select organizations, such as the Zionist Bergson Group, sought to rally American Jews, the majority of Jewish American citizens became more aware of their minority status and more cautious of American anti-Semitism.[67] I argue that the Holocaust, in addition to suburbanization and McCarthyism,

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[64] Diner, *We Remember with Reverence,"* 326.
[65] Lilia Corwin Berman, "American Jews and the Ambivalence of Middle-Classness," *American Jewish History* 93, no. 4 (2007), 411.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Rafael Medoff "New Perspectives on How America, and American Jewry, Responded to the Holocaust," *American Jewish History* 84, no. 3 (1996), 261.

caused America's predominantly Jewish comic culture to bury its ethnic roots and avoid resurrecting discrimination. Because the Holocaust set a precedent for the worst consequences of anti-Semitism, Jewish comedians with white Christian audiences turned to a style of humor that would expedite their assimilation to American culture and popularity. In response, however, a small portion of Jewish American comedians, alarmed at the decline of their ethnic tradition, preserved a subculture of Yiddish comedy. Though they never attained the popularity of their assimilated peers, these comedians allowed Jewish humor to survive a decade of assimilation until Lenny Bruce and Alan Sherman revived its tradition in the late 1950s and channeled it into mainstream culture by the 1960s.

The Assimilationists:

One year prior to the publication of Irving Kristol's obituary to Jewish humor, comedians Sid Caesar and Max Liebman introduced the world to *Your Show of Shows*. This bright, slapstick haven of entertainment seemed to bear no relation to the Holocaust. The television program premiered on February 25th 1950 with a plethora of Jewish personnel attending to its writing, production, and performance.[68] Its content, however, did not reveal these Jewish origins. The show's first host, Burgess Meredith, came from a well-established line of Methodist revivalists.[69] He established his talents, not on the stages of vaudeville or comedic radio programs, but in a film production of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men.* In his opening monologue, he introduced the audience to the show's stars, "Sid Caesar, Imogene Coco, Miss Gertrude Lawrence, Marguerite Piazza, Robert Merill…and many many others."[70] Of these stars, only Sid Caesar and Robert Merill, veterans of the entertainment scene in the Catskill mountains, could claim Jewish

[68] Sid Caesar Papers, 1950-1963. The Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.

heritage. Even then, Merill concealed his Jewish birth name, Moishe Miller, upon his ascent to fame in the Metropolitan Opera. In terms of content, the only gesture to Judaism in the show's premiere existed in a short song about the incomparable experience of eating smorgasbord. The singer claimed that "Lox from Lindey's," along with other ethnic foods such as Chow Mein and Borscht, did not compare to the marvelousness of smorgasbord.[71] The writers acknowledged Judaism as one of many American ethnic minorities without devoting the group special attention. And thus, *Your Show of Shows*, the entertainment utopia of Jewish writers, commenced its four-year, high-rated run without revealing its Jewish roots. Caesar's creation was a crown jewel of Jewish comic assimilation.

Sid Caesar's television success encompassed the dramatic shift Jewish comedians undertook in the post-War world. From a technological perspective, the advent of television more than its vaudeville predecessor emphasized shared experience, encouraging content to homogenize and appeal to all viewers.[72] Unlike vaudeville, which attracted urban audiences more acquainted with Jewish people as a culture and minority, 1950s TV audiences included a far greater majority of non-Jews.[73] Joseph McCarthy's strengthening anti-Semitic rhetoric and the advent of suburbanization intimated to Jewish comedians that Jewish humor might no longer attract popularity. The white Christian response to the Holocaust could have only reinforced these comedians' decisions to dilute their Jewish identities. For many non-Jewish Americans, the Holocaust was vague and difficult to conceptualize. Even in May of 1945, as newspapers displayed picture evidence of the tragedy, most Americans could not comprehend the number of victims who perished or identify that the victims were largely Jewish. Non-Jewish Americans

[71] Ibid.
[72] Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 134.
[73] Ibid.

could not "believe the unbelievable."[74] To evoke the Jewish fate on television could potentially alienate audiences who sought entertainment in their comedy and not discomfort.

But popularity was not the only goal for Jewish comedians. Throughout the Great Depression and the war, Jews fell victim to anti-Semitic attacks not only in Europe but also in America. In Boston, gangs targeted Jews as police idly turned a blind eye. In 1937, Cardinal Edward Mooney warned his followers of "world Jewish domination." The United States welcomed the America First Committee in which Charles Lindbergh blamed the Jews for starting the war with Germany.[75] With these events looming in the public sphere, Jews did not want to draw any attention to themselves. After details of the Holocaust reached the United States, Jewish Americans realized how quickly minor anti-Semitism could accelerate.[76] Intellectuals reacted to this environment by avoiding Jewish topics in their writings.[77] Henry Feingold describes a similar trend among the period's Jewish politicians who feared that voters might perceive a proudly Jewish politician as pushing solely Jewish concerns to the forefront of American policy.[78] American Jews were not fully assimilated and did not dare to threaten that precarious status in such a public manner.[79]

Sid Caesar and his team of writers were similarly savvy in their public relations. With millions of viewers every Saturday night, Caesar's performance reached an audience comparable to if not far greater than audiences intellectuals or politicians could reach. Through the previously established behaviors of the latter two, it was no surprise that the term 'Jew' remained largely if not completely absent from the entire run of *Your Show of Shows*—one sketch

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[74] Feingold, *Bearing Witness*, 272.
[75] Epstein, *Haunted Smile*,
[76] Jules Chametzky, Jules. "Notes on the Assimilation of the American-Jewish Writer: Abraham Gahan to Saul Bellow." *Jahrbuch Für Amerikastudien* 9 (1964): 173.
[77] Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares*, 10.
[78] Feingold, *Bearing Witness*, 245.
[79] Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 108.

contained a fleeting reference to a Jew's Harp, an instrument that bears no relation to Jews.[80] Just as many Jewish national organizations removed the word "Jewish" from their names, Sid Caesar redacted it from his comedy.[81] If popular Jewish entertainers emphasized Jews as victims, as self-deprecating Jewish humor usually does, they risked people "laughing *at* the Jews and not *with* [them]."[82] Jewish public figures prominent in America had the responsibility to make sure this branding did not occur.

Though Caesar filtered out most of the old ticks of Jewish humor, there were still tell-tale clues revealing the cultural background of the show's creators. On a December 2nd show in 1950, in a sketch written by Jewish comedian Mel Tolkin and his partner Lucille Kallen, Caesar and Imogene Coco frequented a restaurant. Though Caesar's character affirmed that Coco's character "didn't marry a cheapskate" he proceeded to cross check every item listed on the evening's bill, creating a scene at the restaurant.[83] Another skit from the fourth episode of the show featured a refashioning of the Goldilocks tale. In this version, the heroine's discontent had far less to do with bed sizes and porridge temperatures than with her discontent with "the rent they're asking."[84] These sketches evoked a millennia old stereotype of Jews as miserly. Caesar's characters in these sketches were not identified as Jewish, yet they displayed the ethnicity's most infamous behavioral mark. The Jewish writers of *Your Show of Shows* took a similar approach to the stereotype of Jewish anxiety. A sketch from March of 1950 titled "The Doctor" featured a patient complaining of hot flashes and dizzy spells. Instead of providing this patient with assistance, the doctor pleaded to hypochondria and told his patient, "I'm a sick man,

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[80] Sid Caesar Archives.
[81] Diner, *Promised Land,* 109.
[82] Joshua Kun, "The Yiddish Are Coming: Mickey Katz, Anti-Semitism, and the Sound of Jewish Difference," *American Jewish History* 87, no. 4 (1999), 359.
[83] Sid Caesar Archives.
[84] Ibid.

I can't go running around for every complaint." Ten episodes later, the show presented a sketch on the dangers of superstitions. The writers, once again, referenced anxiety, as the leading character, discussing the practice of reading tea leaves, asserted in an overly defensive tone "it's for nervous neurotic people, but not for me."[85]

These delicate references reveal that *Your Show of Shows* was not completely devoid of Jewish comic tradition. The writers merely did not claim displays of anxiety and stinginess as inherently Jewish values. Lawrence J. Epstein characterizes these fictional individuals that reappear throughout Caesar's show as "urban, with a Jewish sensibility."[86] Sid Caesar and his team refused to spoon-feed Jewish jokes to their audiences. Only viewers in the know would pick up on these bits of Jewish humor and many non-Jewish would be unaware. Scholar Joseph Dorinson contends that the artistic choice to maintain this tradition exposed the "insecurity that gnawed at [Jews'] complacency."[87] One could also interpret the veiled, individual nature of the Jewish joke as an indication of the privatization of American Jewry. In the 1940s, this lack of "corporate communal character" hindered American Jews from embracing shared activism against the Holocaust, and in the 1950s, from collectively responding to the tragedy.[88] Just as religious Judaism became a private matter of the family and the synagogue, so did the Jewish joke.[89] Caesar's artistic choice allowed Jewish comedians to connect with Jewish audiences of varying loyalties without alienating non-Jews.

But perhaps historians should not look towards Caesar's veiled depiction of Jews to understand the effect of the Holocaust on his comedy, but instead analyze his portrayal of

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[85] Ibid.
[86] Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 141.
[87] Joseph Dorinson, "The Jew as Comic: Lenny Bruce, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen" in *Jewish Humor*, ed. Avner Ziv. (Tel Aviv: Papyrus, 1986), 30.
[88] Feingold, *Bearing Witness*, 253
[89] Diner, *Promised Land*, 110

Germans. Though the memory of genocide separated American Jews amongst themselves and from their non-Jewish peers, their antipathy for the German people remained a commonality. Sid Caesar's comedy capitalized on this mutual aversion. His demeaning depictions of Germans began as early as 1949, when he played a foolish German waiter in his first show, *Admiral Broadway Revue*. In this sketch, an American patron fell victim to the annoying antics of an incompetent, heavily accented German waiter who refused to provide the customer with a menu, food, a bill, or even water. The waiter could not understand the patron's simple requests, forcing him to repetitively ask questions.[90] The sketch clearly identified the character as German, compelling viewers to construct an association between idiocy and the German people.

In the very first season of *Your Show of Shows,* Mel Brooks created a German character for Sid Caesar to portray on television, coined by viewers as The Professor.[91] The Professor, whose expertise-based ever-changing names, such Professor Sigmund von Sedative or Professor Ludwig von Snowcap, was a character with clearly defined German heritage. This character held little esteem in the eyes of the audiences and was constantly portrayed as a disheveled fool who knew nothing about his academic focus. To encourage healthier sleeping habits, Professor Sedative forced a millionaire into poverty.[92] Archeologist Professor Ludwig von Fossil, when asked a detailed question regarding the differences between anthropology and archeology, shrugged indifferently and replied "well how about that?"[93] Like the *Admiral Broadway Revue* sketch, this series portrayed Germans as phony experts. These particular sketches foreshadowed Brooks' "career-long obsession with Germans as objects of fear and subjects of ridicule,"

[90] Sid Caesar Archives.
[91] Ted Sennett, *Your Show of Shows*, (Maryland: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2002), 49
[92] Sid Caesar Archives.
[93] Ibid.

affirming the retaliatory nature of the 'Professor' character.[94] Finally, on the Imogene Coco-less continuation of *Your Show of Shows, Caesar's Hour*, Sid Caesar acted in a 1954 sketch titled "The German General." This later sketch took a far more direct hit on the German people. Engaging in a form of comedy labeled "double talk," a style of speech in which invented and gibberish words is used by a speaker to imitate a language, Caesar unashamedly imitated the German tongue. Featuring a comically dictatorial German general and his idiotic assistant, the sketch followed the servant as he prepared the military uniform-clad Sid Caesar for war.[95] On the part of Sid Caesar, this artistic choice served as revenge, echoing Kristol's earlier prophecy on the Jewish fate to steer comedy towards "bitter thrusts" against their enemies.

Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows,* though bursting with Jewish personalities of neuroticism and stinginess, abandoned traditional Yiddish comedy to embrace humor more appealing to an American audience. American Jewish condemnations of German culture, economics, and politics permeated their public rhetoric.[96] In line with this trend, Jewish comedians turned to ridiculing the German enemy. This form of comedy, in the simplest terms, was safe. It did not require Jewish comedians to emphasize their own differences or remind their audiences that they were once victims of the ultimate tragedy. These efforts to maintain a distance revealed themselves even in the seemingly secure German-deprecating comedy. When Mel Brooks first presented these sketches to Caesar, he fervently resisted. This confrontation stirred such a controversy that it mushroomed into a "real fistfight" on 54th street.[97] When Caesar assumed the role of a German general, he portrayed a military leader from World War I and not World War II. But regardless of this distance, mocking Germans provided Jewish

[94] Dorinson, *Jew as Comic*, 35.
[95] Sid Caesar Archives.
[96] Diner *Reverence and Love*, 217.
[97] Sennett, *Your Show of Shows*, 49.

comedians with the opportunity to retaliate against their murderers. Dorinson contends that in these German sketches, Caesar and Brooks were "acting out of a deep-seated anger harbored by a vast majority of Jews against Germans."[98] Caesar's revenge, however, was subversive and like his portrayals of Judaism, fortified against direct accusations from those who took offense. He assimilated to the white Christian Americans who would secure his popularity but reserved a few jokes that vaguely referenced the Jewish tragedy.

Caesar and his writers were clearly not the only Jews in the popular entertainment world of the 1950s. Like Caesar's production, Gertrude Berg's television series, *The Goldbergs* responded to America's post-Holocaust environment with Jewish comic assimilation. First broadcast as a radio show throughout the 1920s and 30s, Berg brought her domestic comedy about a Jewish family in the Bronx to television in the 1950s. The radio program embraced American Jewish life with far more zeal than the television show that followed. Gertrude Berg's Yiddish-intonated English allowed non-Jewish American audiences during the Great Depression to engage with unassimilated Jewish content.[99] On the radio, *The Goldbergs* represented the blatantly Jewish comedy that appealed to urban audiences in the pre-War American world. It actively captured some of the most tragic and uncomfortable elements of its contemporaneous Jewish condition. A 1939 episode even referenced Kristallnacht, as the Goldbergs found their Passover Seder interrupted by a rock thrown through their window.[100] These clearly Jewish elements of the radio predecessor to the television show underscored the subsequent de-Yiddishization of the sitcom in the following decades.

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[98] Dorinson, *Kvetching and Shpritzing*, 80

[99] Donald Weber, "Taking Jewish American Popular Culture Seriously: The Yinglish Worlds of Gertrude Berg, Milton Berle, and Mickey Katz," *Jewish Social Studies* 5, No. ½ (1998). 129.

[100] Vincent Brooke, "The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized "The Goldbergs" (And Got "Berg-Iarized" in the Process)," *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 4 (1999), 54.

Outside the context of the Holocaust, the televised version of *The Goldbergs* had well-defined reasons to alter its Jewish zeitgeist. In the 1950s, American cities gave way to growing suburbanization in the United States. Jews participated, in large numbers, in this abandonment of cities, moving far from the confines of ghetto-like neighborhoods. Lila Corwin Berman claims that post-War depictions of American Jews shed the stereotypes of Yiddish lingo and large inner-city families. American Jews readily adopted lifestyles common to all middle-class Americans as they spoke an English untainted by their Eastern European roots and resided in suburban homes.[101] *The Goldbergs* readily followed in their footsteps. Additionally, shortly after its premiere, the show's sponsor insisted that Philip Loeb, who portrayed the show's patriarch, Jake Goldberg, be fired for his communist associations.[102] Throughout 1950s McCarthyism, many anti-Communists considered the terms "Jewish" and "Communist" as synonymous.[103] As a result, accusations against Loeb fostered the potential for viewers to attack the show with anti-Semitic rhetoric. After Berg replaced Loeb and signed with a new sponsor, she only further shrank away from the show's Jewish roots to avoid the resurgence of such controversy.

Upon its 1949 premiere, Berg's show was one of many contemporary television programs that broadcast the minority experience to a larger American audience. *Amos n'Andy* centered on the African American experience and *The Honeymooners* on the Irish American narrative. But as these series began to totter on the verge of cancelation, Berg homogenized the previously perceptible Jewish soul of *The Goldbergs*. Gertrude Berg ceased to use a Yiddish "dialect" in her performances.[104] But even the loss of the Yiddish vernacular did not normalize

[101] Berman, "Jews and the Ambivalence," 419.
[102] Brooke, "Americanization of Molly," 53.
[103] Diner, *Reverence and Love,* 14.
[104] Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 72.

the show enough to satisfy American audiences. In the mid-1950s, as American television found audiences and stations outside of New York City, the show's Bronx setting began to contribute to the show's declining ratings.[105] Berg's urban lifestyle was no longer accessible to her viewers. Diner notices that soon "a menorah on the mantelpiece was the only clue that the show [was] about a Jewish family."[106] The only exception to Diner's observation was a 1954 episode that featured the family attending Yom Kippur services and reciting the Kol Nidre prayer.[107] By 1955, Gertrude Berg relocated her fictional nuclear Jewish family from the Bronx to the suburb of "Haverville."

There, the true de-Yiddishization of *The Goldbergs* began. The title of the program began to oscillate between *The Goldbergs* and simply *Molly*. This alteration stripped the show of its traditionally Jewish family name, further shrouding its ethnic roots. These adjustments to the show's Yiddish content were active decisions made my Berg and her producers. In a 1956 interview with *The Commentary*, she discussed her hesitation to use Yiddish lingo or discuss controversial Jewish topics on the show. She told her interviewer, "You see darling, I don't bring up anything that will bother people."[108] Though this quotation likely referred to the show's controversial run-in with communist accusations, it inadvertently recalled the Holocaust. According to Diner, the anti-Semitic rhetoric of McCarthyism kept the Holocaust alive in Jewish memory.[109] Allegations of Communist affiliations against one of her lead actors evoked Holocaust-accentuated fears of anti-Semitism and led Berg to further mute the show's Jewish identity. Unlike Caesar, whose show depended on a gentile guise from its very premiere, Berg

[105] Americanization of Molly, 45
[106] Diner, *Promised Land*, 96.
[107] Brooke, "Americanization of Molly," 54.
[108] Morris Freedman, "From the American Scene: The Real Molly Goldberg," *Commentary* (1956).
[109] Diner, *Reverence and Love*, 274.

could not strike a balance between assimilation and the show's originally Jewish identity. That Jewish aesthetic was the show's foundation. Without this substance, it soon became an imitation of the already popular *Father Knows Best* and was subsequently canceled.[110]

With the advent of suburban towns that placed Jews next door to their white Christian neighbors, American Jews lost the communal encouragement to retain their comedic culture. Perhaps if America's Jewish population still lived in secluded lower East Side enclaves, they would have retained the ability to transform a tragedy, even as colossal as the Holocaust, into therapeutic comedy. Instead, the new geographic rearrangement of Jews in the 1950s represented an "opportunity" to become "less different."[111] This outlook on suburbanization, however, can cater to the misinterpretation that the homogenization of Jewish comedy occurred without inspiration from the Holocaust. It paints an all too optimistic picture, as it credits the diminishment of Jewish comedy to the positive force of suburban integration. If suburbanization entailed true toleration it should have removed "the raison d'être" for tragedy-based Jewish humor to exist."[112] But Berg's and Caesar's active decisions to veil Jewish jokes, revealed that the lack of Jewish identity did not reflect an opportunity but the sacrifice of authenticity. The humor still existed, but their recent past encouraged them not to share it. Suburban "toleration" was not as a post-Holocaust privilege but a post-Holocaust price tag. Though the Holocaust diminished the societal acceptability of anti-Semitism in the United States, its immediate aftermath did not cater to a flaunting of the Jewish identity to a largely white Christian audience.

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[110] Brooke, "Americanization of Molly," 56.
[111] Berman, "Jews and the Ambivalence," 426.
[112] Jarrod Tanny, "On Kanter's Lunch: Old Jews Slurping Soup and the Fate of Jewish Humor," *Jewish Film & New Media* 4, no. 2 , 203.

The Yiddish Resistance:

Sid Caesar and Gertrude Berg, though popular among non-Jewish American audiences, did not define the entire narrative of Jewish American comedy in the 1950s. While their approach to humor closely followed Kristol's grim belief in its ultimate death in a post-Nazi world, other Jewish American comedians sought to keep Yiddish humor 'slightly alive.' These preservationists of Yiddish comedy did not use their wit to respond to the Holocaust. They did not mock Germans or ever mention the colossal genocide that affected the Jewish people. Their embrace of Jewish comedy predominantly sought to resist the assimilationist tendencies of their more popular Jewish comic peers. These comedians found little popularity on the mainstream platform of television, opting instead to preserve their humor in long-playing records, which entered the market in 1948.[113] This selective technological better preserved and allowed Jewish audiences to privately indulge in these comedians' more ethnically Jewish humor. Though their efforts found little widespread success, their content preserved an Old World humor for the Yiddishization of American comedy that would follow in the decade to come.

Milton Berle's tenure in the spotlight of American television attested to the short-lived success of perceptibly Jewish humor in the 1950s. On his live show, which aired in 1948, Berle entertained American audiences with costumes, vaudeville, and adlibs. He did not hesitate to pair this humor with the occasional expression of Yiddish. Terms such as "schvizing" and "sheytal" crept onto the show.[114] Berle reached the height of his popularity between 1949 and 1952.[115] Berle's ethnic humor only thrived during this short period because of the large concentration of television audiences in urban areas. The majority of his viewers resided in New

[113] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 17.
[114] Epstein, *Haunted Smile,* 132.
[115] Weber, "Yinglish," 135.

York City where his Yiddishisms struck a familiar chord. By the mid-1950s, broadcasting networks expanded their programming to rural and suburban populations who would either not understand Jewish references or react negatively to them.[116] Consequently, Berle's reputation in the entertainment world dissipated, as he "proved too Jewish for America."[117]

Mickey Katz, like Berle, emphasized his Jewish background in his comedy. Throughout the 1950s, he released several albums of Yiddish parodies through Capitol Records. These parodies were accompanied by Klezmer music and saturated with Yiddish terminology. Katz used his comedic talents to parody American culture with Jewish vocabulary, stereotypes, and traditions. His most famous song, 'Duvid Crockett,' recorded in August of 1951, took the American hero of the wild frontier, twisted his name with a touch of Jewish linguistic tradition, and rebranded him as "the king of Delancy Street, home of Gefilte fish and kosher meat." In another parody, Katz reworded Merle Travis's song "16 Tons" from an ode to coal miners into a musical glorification of Yiddish foods such as "herring mislines, stuffed heldzl, and begyl."[118] Katz served as a direct contrast to Caesar and Berg. Instead of revising his comedic style to match the standardization of the 1950s, he tried to force Jewish culture to adhere to its Yiddish tradition. As noted by Joshua Kun, in the wake of the Holocaust, Jews sought a secure place under the umbrella term of "white." Katz reminded American Jews that they did not and should not fit under this umbrella.[119] Unfortunately for Katz, his antiassimilationist attitude towards Jewish culture never entered American living rooms on television. Instead, his Yiddish parodies were a "space of subculture identification" for only a small portion of Jewish Americans.[120] Even

[116] Epstein, *Haunted Smile,* 137.
[117] Ibid., 134.
[118] Mickey Katz. *Mickey Katz Greatest Schticks*. Koch Records, 2000.
[119] Kun, "The Yiddish Are Coming," 346.
[120] Weber, "Yinglish," 144.

his albums were met with only modest sales.[121] Though he opted to highlight his humor on records rather than television, like Berle, Katz was too Jewish for the 1950s.

The comedians who engaged with overtly Jewish humor found little success with non-Jewish audiences while those who approached that identity with caution flourished in the national entertainment scene. Not all Jewish comedians, however, sought to appeal to white Christian audiences. Katz proved that Jewish humor did not necessarily thrive, but persisted throughout the assimilationist era of the 1950s in comedy albums when marketed to Jews, by Jews. His tendency to release records rather than make TV appearances reflected the aforementioned individualizing of American Jewry. Records, in their nature, catered to a far more private experience than national TV broadcasting. Engagement with Katz's comedy required active decision making among his audiences. His tendency to use this medium was symbolic of the privatization of American Jewry.

Comedian Benny Bell approached his preservation of Yiddish comedy in a manner similar to Katz, though he appealed to an even more niche enclave. In 1959, Bell released an album titled *Pincus the Peddler Presents Kosher Style Novelty Tunes, Mostly English with Incidental Yiddish*. Bell's record exercised a Yiddish vocabulary far more extensive than the one embraced by Berle and Katz. Featuring songs such as 'Parnussa,' the Yiddish word for livelihood, and 'El Toreadore," a Yiddish reworking of the Toreador song from the opera *Carmen*, his album reflected a clear divergence between Jewish and non-Jewish identities. He ended the album with a solemn recording of the "Hatikavah," the Israeli national anthem. These songs revealed that if Berle and Katz were unpopular among non-Jewish audience due to their 'Yiddishims,' then Bell was practically inaccessible. Like Katz, Bell used the individualistic

[121] Mark Cohen. "My Fair Sadie: Allan Sherman and a Paradox of American Culture," *American Jewish History* 93, No. 1, (March 2007), 55.

nature of records to spread Jewish comedy. After all, the Yiddish terminology and emotional ties to Israel that permeated his album would alienate the typical non-Jewish listener. He did not even try to market his work to a larger American audience, as he produced his work through his personal record company, Bell Enterprises. This production background gestured to Bell's nonconformist attitude towards Jewish humor. Unlike Katz, he made little effort to recall Jews who had already assimilated, but took care to preserve Old World Jewish humor.[122]

Yiddish comic resistance persisted not only through the active efforts of subculture Jewish comedians but also in the private lives of the more popular comedians that were cast-off by the Yiddishists for abandoning their humorous legacy. The most popular example that reflected this trend is The Borscht Belt, where Jews spent their summers in a "Jewish Eden.[123]" There comedians indulged in Old World Jewish traditions of Yiddish comedy and Klezmer music. The Jewish bubble of the Catskill resorts, however, was far more representative of the interests of Jewish audiences rather than the comedians themselves. Catskill comedians adhered to the specific content that would amuse upper class Jewish vacationers. The New York City's Friars Club, however, reflected the Jewish strain of American comedians presented to neither a Jewish nor non-Jewish public. There, the comedians interacted only amongst themselves. Founded by Broadway representatives in 1904, the club soon boasted dozens of Jewish members from across the American entertainment world. In the 1950s the club grew in eminence, as it not only began to host its legendary 'roasts,' but also relocated to its current headquarters, an English Renaissance mansion in Midtown Manhattan. That year, the club's members also inaugurated the organization's publication: *Friars Fables*. Circulating among only the club's members, the

[122] Benny, Bell. *Pincus the Peddler presents Kosher Style Novelty Tunes*. Bell Enterprises. 1959.
[123] Epstein, *The Haunted Smile,* 109.

bimonthly magazines represented the member comedians' and entertainers' more private lives, and as such, attitudes towards Judaism.[124]

In the very first issue, published in November of 1950, the journal featured a section titled "Meet the Friars," which listed the name of each member and a quote of their choosing that highlighted their humor. This publication reveals the vein of Jewish jokes that popular Jewish comedian hesitated to present on the television screen in the 1950s. After all, in this journal, the friars were only presenting themselves to others of the same comedic and often ethnic background. Emmett Callahan, a company manager, wrote beside his name, "what a kind of a name is that for a nice Jewish boy" and Lou Brice, a self-defined assistant entrepreneur, identified himself in the journal as "the Jewish Nick the Greek." Comedians Sam Levenson and Jack E. Leonard respectively called themselves "the Jewish Will Rogers" and "The Jewish Romo Vincent." This blatant self-identification, merged with the identifies of figures representing America's other ethnic minorities, diverged from the assimilationist approach these figures embraced in more public spheres. Another journal issue featured a short poem titled "A Yiddisher XMAS." This poem told the magazine's readers of Sammy, a small boy, who wanted a present for Christmas "just like a regular 'Goy.'"[125] An issue from August 1951 featured an article on a Friars Club-sponsored night celebrating comedian Jack Benny. The journal's feature on the event transcribed several jokes made throughout the celebration, revealing the Yiddish nature of these comedians' more private lives. In a speech on Benny's career, actor George Jessel joked, "I describe virtues where none exist and throw orchids at people whose faces should be covered with tsimas."[126] This Yiddish word for stewed meat, though familiar to the

[124] Friars Fables Friars Club Periodicals, 1950-1971. New York Public Library, New York City, New York.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.

Jewish comedians at the show, had to be explained to the non-Jewish mayor of New York City who happened to be in attendance. The Friars Club's publication did not push the Jewish identity upon audiences like Berle's or Katz's comedy. But it also did not desperately struggle to assimilate to a larger American audience like Berg's or Caesar's. The presence of Jewish humor throughout its pages was neither exaggerated nor shrouded, but naturally occurring.

Though a term like "Yiddish resistance" applied to comedians such as Bell and Katz, who consciously sought to oppose the assimilative style of America's more mainstream Jewish comics, it glossed over the undercurrent of Yiddish comedy that survived in the more private lives of these comedians. References to Judaism and Yiddish terminology were not only a rebellious divergence from the conventionality of white Christian culture, but the private vocabulary of a boys' club; inaccessible to nonmembers, but nevertheless surviving. The existence of this Yiddish comedy, whether it functioned as opposition or as the private manifestation of one's Jewish identity, illustrated that the renowned Sid Caesar and Gertrude Berg did not monopolize the entire narrative of Jewish comedy in the 1950s. Though silent about the Holocaust, contrary to Kristol's pessimistic estimates, in America's post-Holocaust world, Jewish comedy remained alive.

Conclusion:

The Jewish comedy of the 1950s revealed that the memory of the Holocaust contributed to the assimilation of Jewish humor broadcast to the tastes of white Christian audiences. The Yiddish comic resistance emerged in opposition to this trend. On the surface, suburbanization and McCarthyism were the main origins of the homogenized comedy that promised Jewish comedians popularity and success. This regimented humor, at its root, however, deflected the potential for anti-Semitism in an environment of growing toleration. In the eyes of American

Jews, anti-Semitism now had the potential to yield results far more dangerous than they previously imagined. With regards to the comic content itself, the term 'homogenization' proved an all-encompassing term that failed to capture the subtext of the decade's Jewish humor. Popular comedians only truly addressed the Holocaust by simply ridiculing a common American enemy while concealing Jewish attributes that might reignite the tragedy's anti-Semitic roots. In response, Yiddishite comedians embraced their Jewish identities and in a more historical Jewish comic fashion, fanned the dying sparks of the Yiddish comic legacy. However, these comedians preserved this Old World humor without referencing the Holocaust. The application of Kristol's question underestimates the persistence of American Jewish comedy. Jewish humor in the United States was only mostly dead. It retreated to the private indulgences of Jewish Americans, as the Holocaust exaggerated their fears of anti-Semitism and triggered the need to integrate with a population that could assure Jewish security. Privatization, however, did not entail obliteration. It merely inspired a situationally justified timidity. The memory of the Holocaust remained a significant factor that helped account for the delay of the so-called "Yiddishization" of American comedy to the 1960s.

Chapter 3: "And Now We Neologize Jewish and Goyish": Lenny Bruce, the Holocaust, and Challenging American Audiences[127]

The undercurrent of resistance that lingered throughout the assimilated and homogenous environment of the 1950s transcended many political, ethnic, and cultural minorities residing in the United States. Disenfranchised African Americans, communists, and unassimilated Jewish performers, to very different extremes, were unwelcome in the mainstream entertainment industry of the 1950s. The popular performance platforms of television and radio encouraged universal, nonethnic comedy that suited the conformism of suburbanization. Though some Jewish comedians enjoyed popularity among audiences inclined to this conformity, others did not.[128] By the late 1950s, however, as the entertainment industry slowly relaxed its ethnic constraints, admired Jewish comedians such as Sam Levenson and Myron Cohen began to integrate Jewish comic dialect into their humor. Nonetheless, their content adhered to the apolitical and inoffensive jokes that defined the decade's most popular entertainment.[129]

As the previous chapter demonstrates, the most daring Jewish comedians did not disappear; rather, their art persisted underground through personally produced LPs, privately published written material, and performances in small downtown clubs.[130] In the early 1950s, these comedians included the aforementioned Mickey Katz and Benny Bell, but by the end of the decade, this underground comedic network allowed a new generation of comedians to emerge and redefine the quality of Jewish humor. Born during the Great Depression, this generation of Jewish comedians did not harbor nostalgia for the immigrant culture of the early 20th century Lower East Side. Not bound by the one-liner quips and commercial aims of Sid Caesar and

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[127] John, Cohen. ed., compiler. *The Essential Lenny Bruce* (Ballantine Books, 1967), 53.
[128] Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 158.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter*, 76.

Gertrude Berg, they embraced an introspective, stream-of-consciousness monologue for their performances. Their content, inspired by the political and social assimilative repression of the 1950s, pushed against boundaries of free speech and societal criticism.[131]

The systematic repressive institutions that prevented the survival of either ethnic or societally critical comedy began to dissipate as early as the mid-1950s. By 1954, the United States Senate censured Joseph McCarthy, reducing fears among American celebrities of anti-communist and anti-Semitic rhetoric.[132] Though this censure did not fully ameliorate bigotry towards Jewish Americans or communists, the threat of arrest specifically targeting these identities had started to diminish. Political criticism became a less hazardous process for those inclined to engage in such expressions. For American Jewish communities, this change in rhetoric allowed the privatized liberal practices of many suburban Jews to creep to the surface. Across political, cultural, and social activist efforts, Jews found themselves at the front with far less impulse to conceal their religious backgrounds.[133] In Plainview, Long Island, suburban Jewish parents campaigned to remove Christian teachings from public school curricula.[134] Many younger Jews openly sympathized with African Americans combatting racism. Jewish scholars began to receive prominent appointments in academia. In 1958, Leonard Bernstein became the conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and in 1961, John F. Kennedy named Arthur Goldberg as the first Jewish U.S Secretary of Labor, and later, as a Supreme Court justice.[135] Though Jewish figures already populated both the underground and mainstream comedy industries, unobstructed Jewish representation in other public disciplines drove enterprising

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[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid., 81.
[133] Diner, *A New Promised Land*, 106.
[134] Rachel Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 51.
[135] Diner, *A New Promised Land*, 107.

comedians to loosen the reigns on comic conformity.[136] Many underground comedians utilized the national trend in liberalization to create a more sexual, politically charged, and personal style of comedy. For pioneering Jewish comedians, these changes included a greater expression of Jewish content.

Both literary scholar Lawrence Epstein and historian Joseph Dorinson identify Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce as the two Jewish comedians who departed from the placid comedy of their predecessors and embraced their art as a platform for societal criticism and shock.[137] Though Sahl played a vital role in revolutionizing American comedy, he rarely acknowledged his Jewish heritage, or the Holocaust, nor did he cite either as influences in his humor. His work functioned solely as a political commentary that attacked the platforms of Richard Nixon and Joseph McCarthy. Though Mort Sahl was Jewish and a comedian, he had no intention of exploring Judaism in his comedy.[138] As a result, he will remain largely absent from this chapter. Lenny Bruce, however, who famously integrated both Jewish content and the Holocaust into his comedy, will serve as the chapter's epicenter.

Throughout his career, Lenny Bruce often satirized the Jewish religion, physicality, and culture; however, in the 1960s he also became the first prominent comedian to directly discuss the Holocaust from a comedic perspective. This chapter explores how Bruce's references to Judaism and allusions to the Holocaust though thematically analogous, had distinct motivations. Bruce embedded allusions to Judaism and Yiddish in his acts in an effort to drag the scandalizing themes of underground comedy to the public sphere. As Bruce sought to differentiate himself from assimilated 1950 suburban culture, Judaism became a distinctive calling card that

[136] Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter*, 108.
[137] Ibid., 110.
[138] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 69.

distinguished him from white Christian men. Yiddish and Judaism were merely a part of a comedic package of marijuana, sex, and politics. While the latter topics were popular among other rebel comedians, Bruce's references to the Holocaust were novel. Bruce realized the potential shock value of integrating both the tragedy and its perpetrators into his comedy. After the 1961 international broadcast and popular criticism of the Adolf Eichmann trials, the political sway of the Holocaust in the media became clear to Bruce. He brought the Holocaust to the comic spotlight by using the historical event as a means to challenge American political hypocrisy and consequently emphasize his country's constraints on the freedom of speech.

Throughout his career and after his death, academics and writers described Lenny Bruce's relationship with Judaism as both fascinated and restorative. This mentality extended even to modern fictional portrayals. Cultural scholar Albert Goldman, who wrote one of the first monographs on Bruce, commended Bruce's "chutzpah" and his heroic efforts to reduce the supposed shame and self-consciousness associated with Judaism.[139] Critics also tied Bruce's Holocaust humor to his Jewish heritage, branding this content as a symptom of Jewish "self-hatred." Though scholars such as Sanford Pinkser also recognized the artistic value of Bruce's Jewish humor, they shied from recognizing the extent to which this Judaism remained an artistic tool.[140] Recent scholarship, however, has started to depart from these idealizations of Lenny Bruce as a champion of restoring Jewish humor to mainstream American entertainment. Bruce's Judaism and Holocaust humor were more representative of his identity as an opponent of American mainstream culture than his affinity for the Jewish humor of his recent immigrant ancestors.

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[139] Goldman, "Laughtermakers," 85.

[140] Sanford Pinkser, "*Shpritzing* the *Goyim*/Shocking the Jews," in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1987), 7.

Lenny Bruce and Artistic Judaism:

Born Leonard Alfred Schneider in 1925, Bruce grew up in a family that had largely assimilated to a non-Jewish community and Judaism did not play an integral role in his life. He did not spend his adolescence on the Lower East Side or the Bronx, but rather on Long Island, which throughout the 1930s did not have the Jewish population it does today.[141] Bruce did not have a bar mitzvah nor any formal Jewish education. Instead, he spent his childhood following his mother to her various gigs in comedy and performance. These experiences exposed him to burlesque and sexually overt publications from a young age. As an adult, he served at sea in World War II and eventually pursued a career in comedy with his mother's guidance.[142] Upon his return, he performed only in strip clubs, which catered to the development of his shocking, attention-grabbing humor. American journalist Gerald Nachman argues that Bruce introduced dirty jokes and content into his act in an effort to compete with the strippers who would follow his performance.[143] His original content surrounded the lives of strippers and other sexual matters. Bruce's need to scandalize audiences preceded his interests in Judaism, cementing the former as the foundation of his comic approach rather than the Yiddish and Jewish humor that tend to define his legacy.

Bruce's embrace of Judaism, like his references to sexuality, served as another attention-grabbing aspect of his act. Historians and literary scholars have often debated the roots of this Jewish facet of Bruce's humor. Lawrence Epstein argues that Bruce's growing obsession with religion (and therefore his Jewish heritage) stemmed from his wife's Catholic roots. Gerald Nachman attributes it to the influence of comedian Joe Ancis while David Kaufmann contends

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[141] Dorinson, *Kvetching and Shpritzing*, 112.
[142] Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty & Influence People: An Autobiography*, (Beverly Hills: Playboy Enterprises, 1965), 28.
[143] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 401.

that Judaism symbolized Bruce's rejection of assimilated American suburban life.[144] Regardless of their origin, Bruce's "Yiddishisms" [were] acquired, not inherited."[145] By the late 1950s, jokes on Jewish physicality, anxiety, and linguistic history became central to Bruce's acts. His lack of direct Yiddish heritage, however, continued to reveal itself in the frequent misuse of his chosen Yiddish expressions. In a 1960 Esquire interview, when asked about his sprinkling of Yiddish terminology throughout his acts, Bruce explained, "I don't use words to get laughs. I use them for color, like Picasso—a big bold stroke."[146] This confession further confirmed Bruce's embrace of Judaism as an artistic rather than comically messianic effort. His Jewish roots allowed him to distance himself from conformist American comedy and cement his distinctiveness in the entertainment world.

Because many of Bruce's early performances occurred in strip-joints and later underground clubs, the majority of his extant work comes from later LP records. Produced by independent, alternative Fantasy Records, these albums highlighted Bruce's efforts to emphasize Jewish and Yiddish culture in his comedy. His tendency to define Jewish people as an unassimilated and distinctive population revealed his chosen methodology for defying the conformity of the mid-20th century. In his 1964 album, "Lenny Bruce is Out Again," on a track titled "Jewish Christ Death – Statues of Limitations" Bruce joked,

> Now, a Jew, in the dictionary, is one who is descended from the ancient tribes of Judea…That's what it says in the dictionary; but you and I know what a Jew is—One Who Killed Our Lord. I don't know if we got much press on that in Illinois—we did that about 2000 years ago.[147]

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[144] Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 171; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 396; David Kaufmann, Jewhooing the Sixties, American Celebrity & Jewish Identity : Sandy Koufax, Lenny Bruce, Bob Dylan, and Barbra Streisand, (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 100.
[145] Arthur Steuer, "How to Talk Dirty and Influence People," *Esquire* (November 1, 1960), 154.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Cohen, *The Essential Lenny Bruce*, 116.

Within a few sentences, Bruce not only introduced the Jewish people as the main subject of his joke, but also made light of the millennia-old charge against Jews for instigating the death of Jesus. In its very essence, a definition establishes the distinctiveness of a term. This quip directly departed from the comic practices of popular American Jewish comedians of the 1950s. Additionally, by 1964, Bruce's audience had expanded from its original Beatnik constituents, compelling him to humorously define Jews to a population potentially unfamiliar with the ethnic group. The ultimate transparency of his definition directly counteracted the assimilative efforts of his comedian predecessors.

Bruce's attempts to thwart assimilation not only involved identifying Jewish people but also clearly affirmed what qualities separated them from their Christian neighbors. His most famous routine and the namesake of this chapter, which audiences often labeled "And Now We Neologize Jewish and Goyish" clearly defined the "hip" Jew against the bland "goy."

> Dig: I'm Jewish. Count Basie's Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish. Eddie Cantor's goyish. B'nai Brith is goyish; Hadassah, Jewish. Marine corps–heavy goyim, dangerous. Kool-Aid is goyish. All Drake's cakes are goyish. Pumpernickel is Jewish, and, as you know, white bread is very goyish. Instant potatoes–goyish. Black cherry soda's very Jewish. Macaroons are very Jewish–very Jewish cake. Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime jello is goyish. Lime soda is very goyish.
> Trailer parks are so goyish that Jews won't go near them. Jack Paar Show is very goyish. Underwear is definitely goyish. Balls are goyish. Titties are Jewish. Mouths are Jewish. All Italians are Jewish.[148]

By personifying minority celebrities and complex or controversial inanimate items as Jewish, Bruce frustrated the desire of suburbanized American Jews to identify with white Christian culture. Bruce once preceded this popular joke by voicing the anxiety his Jewish audiences often harbored for it, claiming, "people say 'Well, that's certainly not a very nice attitude, you know. You'll bring back the racial hatred.'"[149] This criticism gestured towards the lingering hesitation

[148] Ibid. 52-53.
[149] Ibid.

of American Jews to engage with public self-identification or self-mocking that might derail their stable status in American society. Bruce's joke reinstated the distinctions between Jews and Christians and colored these distinctions with references to sexuality and African Americans. These references elicited discomfort from Jewish audiences who depended on the safety of assimilation. Bruce's Jewish humor could simultaneously shock Christian audiences and critique Jewish listeners who sought to shroud their history and defining characteristics. The above joke transcended the subtextual comedy of Sid Caesar and the Yiddish nostalgia of Mickey Katz, as it clearly labeled Jews as a separate ethnic entity in a language understandable culturally and linguistically to American Jews and Christians alike.

In the decade after Bruce' death in 1965, Goldman cited these jokes as prophetic of the popularization of Jewish humor that emerged in the late 1960s.[150] Though this phenomenon perhaps emerged as the unintended consequence of Bruce's work, Goldman's claim glosses over Bruce's intentions. Bruce did not carry his Jewish heritage in search of a renaissance, like the older Yiddishites of the 1950s. Instead, Bruce used Judaism as a tool that both accentuated his individuality in the entertainment world and permitted him to mock the assimilative tendencies of the 1950s. Indeed, while Bruce's novel restoration of Jewish humor provoked cultural and social shock, his integration of the Holocaust into his humor further revealed his desire to use comedy for societal and political criticism.

Lenny Bruce and the Holocaust:

The large majority of Bruce's Holocaust jokes stemmed from the international aftermath of the Eichmann trials in 1961. According to Kaufman, Bruce maintained that he joked about Hitler and the Holocaust as early as 1949, recorded material can only substantiate this claim as

[150] Goldman, "Laughtermakers," 85.

early as 1959.[151] This presence of Holocaust material prior to the Eichmann trials, however, brands Eichmann as the catalyst rather than root of Bruce's later shift to more Holocaust centered content. The first concrete evidence of Lenny Bruce's Holocaust humor appeared on his 1959 Fantasy Vinyl, *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce,* featuring his infamous act "Adolf Hitler & the M.C.A."[152] Bruce set the routine in 1927 Germany in the offices of the MCA talent agency, a potential play on the Music Corporation of America. Bruce controversially expanded the acronym to "Mein Campf Arises." In the joke, two German publicity agents, noticing the crumbling authority of the Kaiser, audition actors to fulfill the role of dictator and manipulate the German people. Bruce imitated several men testing for the position, echoing Sid Caesar's famous comic ridicule of German accents. The two agents notice an artist on the street, rename him Adolf Hitler, and cast him as the new dictator of Germany.[153]

Though many historians who comment on Bruce's relationship with the Holocaust label this act as a Holocaust joke, the classification overstretches the piece's content. The act revolved far more around the theatricality of politics rather than the peril of the Jewish people. This content made the quip reminiscent of Vaunce Packard's contemporaneous book, *The Hidden Persuaders,* which revealed the psychological commercial manipulation tactics of advertising executives. Bruce's ability to use Hitler and his depravities to passively criticize the United States as early 1959, foretold the later practices of Kirsten Fermaglich's intellectual subjects Stanley M. Elkins and Betty Friedan.[154] Literary academics interpret this particular mention of World War II in Bruce's content in a similar vein. In particular, Paul McDonald believes that the agents' accents, which mix German and American jargon, represented the potential of the post-

[151] Kaufman, Jewhooing, 135.
[152] Lenny Bruce, Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce, Fantasy Records, 1959, Vinyl.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Fermaglich, *American Dreams,* 12.

war American government to engage in a similar commercial and manipulative endeavor.[155] By the 1960s, according to Fermaglich, comparisons between Nazis and American life were "natural and appropriate for their creators and audiences." Bruce, however, performed before these comparisons were acceptable. The comparisons may have seemed natural to him, but not yet to his audiences.[156] Bruce's Holocaust-related act was more relevant to socio-political conditions in the United States than the traumatic past of the Jewish people.

By the turn of the decade, Bruce discovered a concrete platform to unite his previously disconnected jabs on the Holocaust, Nazis, and American politics. In May 1960, the Israeli government announced the capture of the infamous Nazi criminal Adolf Otto Eichmann. Officials followed this declaration with notice of a televised trial to follow. The internationality and theatricality of this trial pervaded every report on its proceedings and became central to Bruce's comic adaptation of the event. In her renowned observations of the trial, Hannah Arendt took note of the "simultaneous radio transmission" that accompanied its Hebrew dialogue, a broadcast which was "excellent in French, bearable in English, and sheer comedy—frequently incomprehensible—in German."[157] The trial took place in the newly built Beth Ha'am court of law. Arendt noted that the courtroom eerily resembled a theater and that the prosecutor's behaviors revealed his "love of showmanship." To her, the trial represented a show orchestrated by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion to remind the nations of the world of the Holocaust and incite shame for the tragedy. He sought to remind the new generation of this genocide in order to reaffirm the necessity of the State of Israel for the international Jewish population.[158]

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[155] Paul McDonald. ""They're Trying to Kill Me": Jewish American Humor and The War Against Pop Culture." *Studies in Popular Culture* 28, no. 3 (2006): 23.
[156] Fermaglich, *American Dreams,* 3.
[157] Hannah Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," *The New Yorker,* February 16, 1963.
[158] Ibid.

In many respects, Ben Gurion succeeded in these efforts. In the United States, ABC aired nightly half-hour coverage of the trial that other television networks often paired with documentaries on Nazis and the Holocaust. These films, such as *A Verdict for Tomorrow*, reintroduced American audiences to the genocide that preceded the relative international tranquility of the 1950s.[159] Jewish Studies scholar Jeffrey Shandler notes that the trial featured witnesses who could appeal to the passions of viewers. Consequently, the televised affair allowed American audiences to both audibly and visually understand the depth of the atrocities Eichmann committed. Like Arendt, Shandler comments on the dominance of English as the main platform of translation as a reminder that Ben Gurion's primary audience was the United States. The Eichmann trial piqued American interests in the history of Holocaust. Its transmission forced the event into the TV dominated homes of American citizens.[160] The Eichmann trial was not the sole cause of a resurgence of discussions on the Holocaust, but its contribution to dialogue on the subject in the 1960s remained vital.[161] Among American Jews, the trial fused extant, though often disconnected, acknowledgements of the Holocaust. But in contrast to these positively moral effects of the prosecution, many critics of the trial were concerned that its blatant theatricality affected the fairness of the justice system. The obvious performative aspects of the trial also provided Bruce with the opportunity to divulge and challenge similar practices in the United States.

In alignment with this show trial, the majority of Bruce's documented Holocaust comedy appropriately related to the debatably unjust fate of Adolf Eichmann. Assessing this political

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[159] Jeffrey Shandler, "The Man in the Glass Box: Watching the Eichmann Trial on American Television," in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. Barbie Zelizer, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 95.
[160] Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 205.
[161] Diner, *New Promised Land*, 126.

conflict in through comedy did not appeal to many of Bruce's contemporaries, who avoided the topic. Performers Mary Allen and Steve Rossi asserted that "the crimes charged to Eichmann defy humor."[162] While Mary Allen and Steve Rossi could not see the comedy in Eichmann's sins, Bruce detected a scope for humor in the irony of his trial. Though Eichmann developed an untouchable reputation in the world of comedy, Bruce recognized the consequential shock value of discussing this criminal on stage. He knew that his comments on Eichmann would be "forbidden, taboo, altogether unacceptable"[163] One of his first jokes on the trial focused on the criminal rather than the crime.

> Eichmann really figured, you know, "The Jews—the most liberal people in the world—they'll give me a fair shake." Fair? *Certainly*. Rabbi means lawyer. He'll get the best trial in the world, Eichmann. *Ha!* They were shaving his leg while he was giving the appeal! That's the last bit of insanity man.[164]

Likely from a 1961 performance in San Francisco, this joke highlighted Bruce's ability to shamelessly approach this taboo topic. Though this joke referred to the criminal anti-Semitic proceedings of the Nazi party during World War II, it targeted the progression of Eichmann's trial rather than his crimes. Its ability to even reference the Jewish experience during World War II was novel, but this allusion did not define the entirety of the joke. In a few lines, Bruce deliberated the enduring resentment of the Jewish people towards their Nazi oppressors, the criticisms of Hannah Arendt, and the politicization of the trial. This joke was Bruce's contribution to dissident comments made by many of the trial's critics who believed its theatricality and pathos-based prosecution obscured unbiased justice.

The infamy of the Eichmann trials and the subsequent remembrance of Jewish narratives and the Holocaust, however, diminished the individuality that Bruce once hoped his Jewish

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[162] Ibid. 96
[163] Albert Goldman, "Laughtermakers," 96
[164] Cohen, *The Essential Lenny Bruce*, 115.

identity would provide. As Eichmann raised Jewish consciousness and other Jewish comedians began to incorporate Jewish humor into their acts, Judaism became far too mainstream for Lenny Bruce. During a 1961 show, Bruce joked, "Dig this cat [Eichmann], shlepped out, and they [put him] on trial—and set me back another thousand years, cause it's in to be Jewish."[165] Judaism had lost its shock value to Bruce. This development challenged him to raise the contentious stakes of his material. In perhaps his most controversial portrayal of both Eichmann and the Holocaust, Bruce embedded within his act a poem by American monk and pacifist Thomas Merton known as "My Name is Adolf Eichmann." This controversial piece read:

> My name is Adolf Eichmann. The Jews came every day to vat they thought vould be fun in the showers. The mothers were quite ingenious. They vould take the children and hide them in bundles of clothing. Ve found the children, scrubbed them, put them in chambers, and sealed them in. I vatched through the portholes as they vould daven and chant "Hey, mein Liebe, Heyyyy." Ve took off their clean Jewish love-rings, removed their teeth and hair—for strategic defense. I made soap out of them, I made soap out of all of them; and they hung me, in full view of the prison yard. People say, "Adolf Eichmann should have been hung" Nein. if you recognize the whoredom in all of you, that you vould have done the same, if you dared know yourselves. My defense? I vas a soldier. I saw the end of a conscientious day's efforts. I saw all the vork that I did. I, Adolf Eichmann, vatched through the portholes. I saw every Jew burned und turned into soap. Do you think yourselves better because you burned your enemies at long distances with missiles? Without ever seeing what you'd done to them? Hiroshima…Auf Wiedersehen[166]

This recitation was a culmination of Bruce's previous efforts to incorporate the Holocaust into his comic work. Bruce read this poem under a single dim blue spotlight. For his reading, he feigned the Americanized German accent he initially utilized for his performance of the "Adolf Hitler & the M.C.A" joke.[167] This dramatic, animated presentation of a Jewish comedian sympathizing with a perpetrator of genocide gestured to Bruce's efforts to shock his audiences and politicize his work. Eichmann appeared in his comedy not to bring attention to the perilous

[165] Paul Krassner, *The Busting of Lenny Bruce*, (New York: Sage Publications, 2000), 82.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Ibid.

experiences of the Holocaust, but rather as a stooged representative of the American government. The disturbing and meticulous description of gas chambers and Jewish trauma only culminates in the tragic nuclear attack on Hiroshima. After reciting this poem, according to Krassner, Bruce followed the recitation with the proclamation "if we would have lost the war, they would have strung Truman up by the balls, Jim."[168] This final comment confirmed the politically critical intention of the piece. Bruce was arrested for this December 1962 performance. Even though the 1960s presented a far sounder platform for political criticism, Bruce's act pushed the freedom of speech to its limits. Today, the recitation's finer points appear in both the memoirs of counterculture journalist Paul Krassner and the tapes played at Bruce's trial that followed this provocative reading. Bruce left little room for interpretation for both authorities and his audiences. He employed Eichmann's banality of evil to invert his audiences' perceptions of genocide and nationalism. When Eichmann's described actions became the deeds of a soldier, he was no longer different from an American soldier bid to execute a patriotic atrocity.

In addition to their ability to criticize the American government, these gags and anecdotes were revolutionary, as unlike Caesar's German general sketches, they referred to both the perpetrators of the Holocaust and the victims themselves. Lawrence Epstein cites an act where Bruce held up a fake newspaper with the headline "*Six Million Jews Found Alive in Argentina."* Epstein chronologically places this act shortly after the announcement of Eichmann's capture. The satiric newspaper headline likely reflected the exaggerated media that surrounded the affair. In another quip, Bruce advertised, "a Volkswagen pickup truck that was just used slightly during the war carrying the people back and forth to the furnaces."[169] He wove the tragedy into a joke that also targeted the emerging American military-industrial complex or perhaps the country's

[168] Ibid.
[169] Epstein, *Haunted Smile,* 171.

containment-inspired flourishing economic relationship with West Germany. Like their Eichmann-inspired predecessors, these jokes employed the Holocaust as a stage for greater political reproach. The Holocaust proved an attention-grabbing platform to disparage media and industry. While Eichmann's trials offered Bruce a more mainstream pathway into the realm of Holocaust humor, Bruce moved past this event to incorporate its more tragic elements into his comedy. These jokes, however, never reached the popularity of his Eichmann material, as they remain absent from written collections and recordings, with only secondary sources and memoirs testifying to their existence. For Bruce, the Holocaust was an opportunity to shine a light on similar carnage committed by the highest authorities in the United States. By the end of his career, Bruce voiced the same domestic political criticisms as Mort Sahl but with the Holocaust as his language.

Conclusion:

Though often idolized as the prophet who restored Jewish humor and inspired the unquestionably Jewish comedy of Mel Brooks and Don Rickles, Lenny Bruce's Jewish humor was an artistic tool, not a marker of ethnic pride. As a third-generation American citizen with minimal Jewish upbringing, he did not bear the traditional markers of nostalgia for either Eastern Europe or the Lower East Side, or familiarity with the trope of turning tragedy into comedy. Rather, inspired by the liberalization of the entertainment industry in the face of McCarthy's censure and a growing antagonism against the conformity of the 1950s, Judaism became Bruce's symbol of divergence. In the 1950s, Judaism and Jewish humor became a private affair and as a result, a public Jewish identity set Bruce apart from white Christian convention. Though Bruce helped restore Jewish humor to fashion, his initial choice to engage with Jewish humor was because it was not fashionable. Later in his career, with Eichmann's trials dominating

international news, Bruce's jokes about Nazis and the Holocaust, though they supposedly existed as early as 1949, became popular content that was also contemporaneously applicable. The novelty of the Holocaust in Bruce's humor was shocking and attention-grabbing. Therefore, it served as a suitable tool to criticize mainstream popular culture, America's social and political past, and restrictions on anything that negated assimilation. It also allowed Bruce to set himself apart from other underground comedians such as Mort Sahl who capitalized off of critiquing the government. This constant effort to push against boundaries of 1950s conformity and emphasize his artistic individuality made Lenny Bruce the first comedian to actively joke about the Holocaust. And though Bruce's inspirations bore little genuine inspiration from the history of the Jewish people, he paved a road for the Yiddishization of comedy in the 1960s.

Chapter 4: The Holocaust and the 'Yiddishization' of American Humor

In the October 1965 issue of *Esquire*, American comic novelist, Wallace Markfield announced, "for good or for ill, the Jewish style, with its heavy reliance upon Yiddish and Yiddishisms, has emerged as not only *a* comic style, but as *the* prevailing comic style."[170] Yiddish and Jewish humor, which less than ten years prior pervaded only the subtext of mainstream television shows and the low-selling records of alternative comedians, now became the comic norm. A comic masterpiece in its own right, Markfield's article synchronized humor, political commentary, and myriad examples of daily Yiddish quips into a written microcosm of the Jewish American comic culture that followed Lenny Bruce's transitional reign.[171] Markfield's declaration emerged from an ever-growing burst of Jewish comedy in the world of stand-up, film, and television. This classification of "Yiddishization" gestured to the clear use of Jewish characters, accents, tropes, or settings. Considering Markfield's prominent role as a Jewish artist, his statement might seem hyperbolic. The status of his article's platform, however, helps dispel this concern. In the 1960s, *Esquire* magazine was a pioneer in the unconventional, truth-over-facts, style of "new journalism." At the time of the article's publication, *Esquire* boasted an all-time high circulation of approximately 900,000 readers.[172] The magazine's audience, though mostly men, accounted for a significant portion of young Americans, regardless of their religion. Markfield's observations on ethnically Jewish content merited publication in a popular, legitimate platform and as this chapter will explore, truly reflected a mainstream trend.

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[170] Wallace Markfield, "The Yiddishization of American Humor," *Esquire* October 1, 1965.
[171] Ibid.
[172] Carol Polsgrove, *It Wasn't Pretty, Folks, but Didn't We Have Fun?: Surviving the '60s With Esquire's*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 92.

The general political and social sentiments of Markfield's specifically Jewish audience significantly diverged from Sid Caesar's religiously and ethnically privatized suburban Jewish spectators and even Lenny Bruce's countercultural following. As the public freedoms enjoyed by American Jews in the late 1950s and early 1960s increased, younger Jews became avid participants in the Civil Rights and Free Speech movements. African American and Jewish American communities made social alliances with a shared goal to dismantle American bigotry. Both felt categorized, to different extremes, as members of racial and ethnic groups rather than individuals.[173] This alliance, though short-lived, extended to social practice. Jewish organizations, ranging from synagogues to youth groups, became enthusiastic proponents of the African American campaign for civil liberties. Temple Sinai of Washington D.C. served as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's original base of operation and over one-third of the white college students who participated in the "Freedom Summer" of 1964 were Jewish.[174] The fervor of the Civil Rights movement became increasingly tied to crusades to restore the freedom of speech and expression. The Berkley Free Speech Movement boasted several Jewish leaders including Jack Weinberg, Bettina Aptheker, and Jackie Goldberg. This mass participation reflected the discontent of many Jewish Americans with the religiously and ethnically restrained environment of their suburban childhoods in the 1950s.[175] These circumstances provided social critical and ethnically proud Jewish American entertainers with a Jewish audience far less inclined to conceal and avoid discussing their liminal social standing.

A wide range of historiography has tracked the effects of the Civil Rights movement and Cold War era counterculture on the advent of Jewish representation in mainstream entertainment.

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[173] Diner, *A New Promised Land*, 112
[174] Ibid. 113
[175] Kirsten Fermaglich. "Mel Brooks' *The Producers*: Tracing American Jewish Culture Through Comedy, 1967–2007." *American Studies* 48, no. 4 (2007): 61.

While Joseph Boskin's *Rebellious Laughter* reflects on this trend in both the stand-up and humorous literature of various ethnic minorities in the United States, Gerald Nachman's *Seriously Funny* investigates how individual comedians responded to the sexual and social revolution of the 1960s. The literature generally concurs that Jewish comedians realized their Jewish perspective on and experience with anxiety and marginalization could encompass the experiences of its openly progressive audiences.[176] Therefore, Jewish comedians shed the scripted and domesticated comedy of the dwindling Yiddish theater and early 1950s television, to reembrace and restyle the Jewishly bold, self-mocking, humor perpetuated by individuals such as Mickey Katz and reintroduced by figures such as Lenny Bruce. The 1960s provided these comedians with an audience exposed to the social turmoil of the decade and far more prepared to listen. Colleges and universities invited humorists and comedians previously deemed too liberal or radical to perform for students. In 1961, the top 150 best-selling records included over a dozen comedy albums.[177] With a significant proportion of Jewish comedians already dominating the field and this loosening of structured, restricted comedy, Markfield's "Yiddishization" seemed almost inevitable.

As blatantly Jewish comedy became a comic norm and national confrontations against racial and ideological prejudice continued to intensify, the most daring Jewish American comedians used their growing self-expression to introduce the Holocaust into their mainstream content. Though the Holocaust remained a shocking subject even outside the comic world, in the midst of the 1960s social turmoil, it began to symbolize the worst consequences of racial and religious prejudice.[178] By the late 1960s, the Six-Day War augmented domestic turmoil to create

[176] Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter*, 44.
[177] Ibid., 82.
[178] Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 87.

a more unified front for public discourse on the Holocaust among international Jewish communities.[179] This emergence of Holocaust humor in the content of popular comedians and television comedies followed a greater movement in the United States and Europe to memorialize this tragedy.[180] Jewish performers deviated from Bruce's shock-value treatment of the Holocaust and instead employed their talents to reclaim and reconfigure this personal tragedy, often admitting to this intention and practice. The public recognition of ethnic and racial abuse in the United States, which inspired the "Yiddishization" of American comedy, also contributed to the efforts of the American Jewish community to memorialize the Holocaust. For a select few bold Jewish comedians, humor served as a platform for cathartic and memorialized retribution.

The "Yiddishized" Example of Literature and Musical Theater:

Throughout the 1960s, popular Jewish representation in entertainment did not strictly adhere to the genre of comedy. Jewish themes manifested themselves in literary and theatrical culture as well, functioning symbiotically with historic events. Increasing protests and demonstrations for free speech and civil rights encouraged artistic production in line with these values. In turn, books, films, and art further fueled rallies and social justice campaigns. For Jewish artists, this relationship entailed a shift towards "Yiddishization."[181] In this context, Markfield's term "Yiddishization" did not necessarily reflect a literal increase in the use of Yiddish terms in written and sung dialogue. Rather, it represented the appearance of openly Jewish protagonists and narratives that actively engaged with episodes of Jewish history. Jewish performers and writers used the marginality of the international Jewish experience to

[179] Diner, *A New Promised Land*, 127.
[180] Ibid.
[181] McDonald, *Jewish American Humor*, 21.

express the American counterculture of the 1950s in the mainstream culture of the 1960s. The eventual "Yiddishization" of American comedy owed its legacy to contemporaneous widespread appearances of Jewish characters and references in American theater and literature.

By the 1960s, as social activists pushed American society to publicly foster ethnic and racial inclusivity, the content and standards for mainstream American entertainment culture widened. The suburban culture of the 1950s had affirmed for popular performers and writers that public identification with their Jewish faith would diminish their reputation among Christian American audiences.[182] However, the sweeping efforts of civil rights groups to provide minorities with the rights of the typical white, Protestant American citizen nurtured a significant portion of American audiences that craved film and literature that would reflect this social progress. This trend transcended the boundaries of American minorities, as not only Jewish, but also African American artists, such as James Baldwin and Diana Ross, rose to fame. Jewish celebrities began to incorporate content in their performance and literature that reflected these efforts at American acculturation.[183] Often their methodology for expanding American mainstream culture included "Yiddishizing" their products. Because Jewish celebrities already permeated industries of literature and musical theater, the "Yiddishization" of mainstream entertainment became all the more encompassing.[184]

In literature, this mindset cultivated the unquestionably Jewish characters and settings embraced by authors such as Leon Uris and Philip Roth. While Uris's 1958 novel *Exodus* portrayed the Jewish people as frontrunners in ethnic pride and revolution, Roth used Jewish characters as representatives of the social liberalization of the 1960s. Uris's book, which sold

[182] Refer to Chapter two
[183] Kaufmann, "Jewhooing," 15
[184] Ibid. 18

over four million copies in two years, presented Jews in a heroic manner.[185] Though published before the culmination of Civil Rights efforts, Uris portrayed the Jewish people as a population that managed to overcome bigotry and discrimination. [186] This transformation of the underdog into an ethnically proud populace matched the changing tides of social justice movements in the late 1950s in the United States. Additionally, the novel positively depicted a Judeo-Christian romantic relationship between its principal characters. These facets of the novel likely enhanced its appeal to Christian American audiences, as it featured them in a savior role in a narrative dedicated to a minority.[187]

Writing only a year after Uris, Roth used Jewish characters as vessels that exemplified the growing contestation of the liberalizing 1960s. His depictions of generational divides and sexual freedom did not observe the religious and ethnic boundaries of 1950s American culture.[188] The short story "Goodbye Columbus" used two Jewish families to reveal the incompatibility of generations, class, and sex in the temporal and cultural transition between the 1950s and the 1960s.[189] Jeremy Dauber summarizes Roth's larger collection of tales as a "firing [of] countercultural shots in all directions."[190] Roth's 1969 work, *Portnoy's Complaint,* employed a Jewish character to shed a far more individualized light on the incompatibility of assimilation in the 1950s with the rebellious counterculture of the 1960s. Its titular character's confusion regarding the self and psychological distress became sentiments that American readers could identify with regardless of their religion.[191] The widespread appeal of Philip Roth's works

[185] Marc Lee Raphael. "From Marjorie To Tevya: The Image of the Jews in American Popular Literature, Theatre and Comedy, 1955–1965." *American Jewish History* 74, no. 1 (1984), 69.
[186] Leon Uris, *Exodus: A Novel of Israel,* (New York City: Doublesday & Company, 1958).
[187] Kaufmann, *Jewhooing,* 33.
[188] Philip Roth, *Goodbye Columbus,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959).
[189] Ibid.
[190] Dauber, *Jewish Comedy*, 194
[191] Ibid. 196

manifested itself in his assortment of awards and recognitions. His first collection of short stories, *Goodbye Columbus,* and his novel, *Portnoy's Complaint,* won awards outside the realm of purely Jewish culture, winning recognition from the National Book Foundation.[192] Roth's ability to simultaneously depict American Jewish life and the larger concerns and struggles of all his readers ensured his popularity in mainstream American literature.

The theater mimicked these literary patterns. According to religious scholar Marc Lee Raphael, prior to 1960, Broadway custom held that any play or musical with Jewish content would inevitably yield to box office failure.[193] By the turn of the decade, however, producers and playwrights began to invest in theatrical content that would fit the new, expanded mainstream. Initial efforts at introducing the Jewish narrative to the Broadway stage in the early 1960s were met with minimal success. The 1961 musical *Milk and Honey*, which sought to thematically mimic *Exodus* by discussing the establishment of Israel ran for only three months.[194] But as Jewish playwrights and lyricists began to fashion humorous Jewish characters relatable to both Christian Americans and minorities on the peripheries of American society, they found far greater success.

The musical *Funny Girl* premiered in March of 1964 and contained a consistent stream of Jewish characters, one-liners, and Yiddish lingo. While, the musical evoked nostalgia for the glory days of Jewish life on the Lower East Side and the culture of Ziegfeld and vaudeville, these Jewish elements coexisted with narrative tropes relevant to all Americans. Barbra Streisand's protagonist character, Fanny Brice, encountered romantic heartbreak, sexual promiscuity, and the tension between a financially fortuitous woman and her unsuccessful

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[192] Dauber, *Jewish Comedy,* 193
[193] Raphael, "From Majorite to Tevye," 69.
[194]Jessica Hillman. "This Lovely Land is Mine": "Milk and Honey's" Restorative Nostalgia for Israel." TDR: The Drama Review 55, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 31-39

husband.[195] *Funny Girl* depicted an interfaith relationship that failed due to socio-financial circumstances rather than any concretely defined differences between the protagonists' religion. It featured a Jewish heroine who found success and popularity among general American audiences.[196] This thematic transcendence cemented the musical's popularity. Additionally the wide appeal of Streisand's consistent and humorous self-mocking at her Jewish origins helped outsiders in America feel comfortable with their own marginal standings.[197]

The decade's most famous musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, opened only six months after *Funny Girl* and also found mainstream success through accentuation of shared values.[198] The Jewish Tevye was an everyman relatable to many Americans. Though residing in an Eastern European shtetl, he struggled with poverty, tradition, and life-affecting discord between generations.[199] The plot of the musical rested on the character's ability to voice these inner thoughts in an often comical manner. Utilizing a Jewish platform, writers Joseph Stein and Sheldon Harnick presented values that any American citizen living in the 1960s could understand and identify with. Additionally, for Jewish Americans, the musical confirmed the "compatibility of their citizenship with their ethnicity.[200] This compatibility is most obvious at the conclusion of this Americanized version of Sholom Aleichem's tale. Expelled from the village of Anatevka, Tevye and his family departed the shtetl with the intention to reach the United States rather than Palestine. In doing so, Tevye chose America as his "Promised Land," gesturing to the character's optimism for harmony and cohesion between Jews and the

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[195] Lennart, Isobel. Music by Jule Syne, lyrics by Bob Merrill. *Funny Girl*. 1964.
[196] Ibid.
[197] Kaufman, *Jewhooing*, 15.
[198] Stein, Joseph. Music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick. *Fiddler on the Roof*. New York: Crown, 1964.
[199] Marc Lee Raphael, "From Marjorie to Tevye," 72.
[200] Stephen Whitfield, "Fiddling with Sholem Aleichem: A history of Fiddler on the Roof," in *Key Texts in American Jewish Culture*, ed. Jack Kugelmass. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 120.

population of the United States.[201] The musical's ability to capitalize on the anxieties at the forefront of both Jewish and Christian minds assured its box-office success. *Fiddler on the Roof,* because of and not in spite of its Jewish characters, became the longest running Broadway show at the time by the 1970s.

Mainstream literature and musical theater were the first medias to "Yiddishize," and their success inspired similar efforts in the world of comedy. These platforms of entertainment confirmed for Jewish comedians that Jewish humor and Yiddish terminology no longer alienated most Christian audiences. On the contrary, this identity now served as an appealing facet of their content. Because the aforementioned musicals and novels were often humorous, comedians understood the particularities of Jewish humor that resonated with mainstream audiences. With these required adjustments in mind, Jewish humor could restoratively "Yiddishize" the realm of comedy.

Adjusting, "Yiddhisizing", and Re-popularizing Jewish Comedy:

The restoration of the Jewish image in literature, musical theater, and film gestured to the growing security of ethnic expression in mainstream entertainment media. In the 1960s, however, Jewish comedy was splintered across assimilated television programs, disappearing Yiddish theaters, and an assortment of underground Jewish comedians that ranged from the old-fashioned Mickey Katz to the counterculture champion, Lenny Bruce. And of these fractured platforms, many were losing mainstream appeal. By the early 1960s, Yiddish theaters had lost their allure and their audiences, Caesar's career had deteriorated, and Lenny Bruce had committed suicide. However, the social progress of the decade inspired underground Jewish comedians to experiment with more ethnically Jewish humor.[202] Prominent works in theater and

[201] Ibid.
[202] Kaufmann, *Jewhooing,* 16.

literature, such as *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Goodbye Columbus*, gestured to the necessary modifications. Additionally, the growing popularity of the LP record made "overnight stars" of these underground Jewish comedians who previously performed only in clubs.[203] With these cultural and technological opportunities, comedians began to include the "everyman" nature of Jewish representation, the liminality of the Jewish experience, and improvisational, adlibbed dialogue into their content. These alterations in content and technological form facilitated the efforts of the Jewish comic to proliferate previously fragmented, ethnically expressive comedy among mainstream American audiences.

Many successful avenues of Jewish humor from the preceding decades did not fit the emerging lax and socially aware environment of the 1960s. In 1959, the *Jewish Advocate* reported on the closure of formerly popular Yiddish playhouses. The journalist commented that these closures "[could] in no way be attributed to Yiddish apathy," and instead blamed Yiddish performers for never making any attempt to adapt or "infuse new blood" into its performances.[204] Indeed many reports on the decline of the Yiddish theater critiqued its rigid content and tendency to adhere to prescribed plots, costumes, and tropes that had not evolved since the 1920s.[205] Sid Caesar, who once managed to adapt and assimilate to fit his contemporary homogenized entertainment world, had grown "stale and predictable."[206] And Mickey Katz, who shed the vaudevillian layout, embedded his comedy with Yiddish linguistic terms that the majority of Americans could not comprehend. These particular strains of Jewish humor did not fit the developing unhindered comic language of the 1960s. Though Lenny Bruce pioneered a new stream of consciousness language in comedy, his dedication to his Jewish heritage remained

[203] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 17.
[204] Marowitz, Charles. "YIDDISH THEATRE'S DECLINE." *Jewish Advocate (1909-1990)*,1959.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 119.

minimal. Jewish comic content required a new commitment to its ethnic roots that would keep with the technological and social trends of the 1960s.

The Jewish comedians who eventually contributed to the "Yiddishization" of American comedy began their efforts long before the 1960s. Comedians such as Mel Brooks, Allan Sherman, and Carl Reiner experimented with this ethnically flamboyant style in the Catskills Borscht Belt, self-published records, and the secluded rooms of the Friars Club.[207] Though their Jewish humor originated at private parties, as literature and musical theater began to reflect the growing appeal of ethnically flamboyant content, these comedians transferred their work to accessible LP records. These pioneers in mainstream Jewish humor eventually inspired other comics to imitate their ethnic content, and collectively established and normalized the presence of Jewish characters, accents, and stereotypes in popular American comedy.

The 1960 release of Mel Brooks' and Carl Reiner's joint comedy album, *2000 Years with Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks*, best symbolized this readjustment of Jewish humor in both expression and technology. Brooks and Reiner conceived the album's feature sketch, "The 2000 Year Old Man," long before the LP's release. According to testimony from the artists, this satire between the two men began as a skit played at parties.[208] As their non-Jewish acquaintances in the entertainment world, such as George Burns and Steve Allen, expressed amusement at the parody, Brooks and Reiner recorded their material.[209] Friends of the comedians claimed that the sketch was different every time Reiner and Brooks chose to perform it. Modern scholars echo these sentiments on the material's constant flux. Lawrence Cohen describes the record's dialogue as uncensored and unrepressed. Joseph Boskin labels this improvised, free-spirited and

[207] Epstein, *Haunted Smile*, 109.
[208] Ibid. 186
[209] Dauber, *Jewish Comedy*, 161.

often nihilistic comedy as "guerrilla satire."[210] "The 2000-Year-Old Man" functioned as a departure from the regulated comedy of Caesar and an evolution of Bruce's work. This skit gestured to the movement of Jewish humor from scripted sketches to a style of comedy that shared a greater alignment with the American embrace of free speech and expression.

This famous track consisted of twelve minutes of rapid-fire question and answer comedy between Reiner and Brooks, through which the two revealed the adjustments in Jewish comedy that permitted this ethnic content to appeal to Jewish and non-Jewish Americans. Throughout the skit, Brooks spoke with a heavy Yiddish accent. By using a Yiddish accent, rather than Yiddish terminology, Brooks kept his "outsider" brand but remained comprehensible to listeners unversed in Yiddish shtick. With regards to specific Jewish stereotypes, one of Brooks' first jokes on the track played on the tradition of mocking Jewish neuroticism and anxiety. When asked "What was the means of transportation [in your day]," Brooks responded "fear." Presented in the anxious environment of the 1960s, humorized Jewish neuroticism became a far more applicable trope. In another quip, Brooks imitated the stereotype of an overbearing Jewish mother, complaining "I have 42,000 children and not one comes to visit me." This particular line foreshadowed the eventual comic victimization of the Jewish mother in a vast portion of the "Yiddishized" American humor that followed later in the decade.[211] In another portion of the track, Brooks lamented the failure of his ancient business, which specialized in the making of Stars of David and failed to make the jump to producing crosses.[212] Though told by a Jewish character with a Yiddish accent, the quip presented the universally applicable experience of economic difficulty. These seemingly insignificant yet influential changes in content and

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[210] Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter*, 120.
[211] Martha A. Ravits. "The Jewish Mother: Comedy and Controversy in American Popular Culture." *MELUS* 25, no. 1 (2000): 6.
[212] Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner, *2000 Years with Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks*, World Records, 1960, Vinyl.

delivery forged possibility for the survival of ethnically proud Jewish humor among America's non-Jewish audiences.

When Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks first released their renowned record they encountered weak sales and little mention in entertainment news.[213] These feeble transactions, however, represented the pioneering nature of Reiner's and Brooks' work rather than its fate. Because of the album's LP record format, consumers could purchase the content long after its release. By the late 1960s, the record became so popular that in a 1966 Playboy interview with Mel Brooks, a satirist referred to the character as "your famous 2000-year-old-man."[214] This offhand comment revealed the cultural permeation of a clearly Jewish character among American audiences. The comedians' applicable adjustments carried their ethnically Jewish humor from the safety of private living rooms to the American mainstream.

Alan Sherman, like Brooks and Reiner, entered the comedy scene in the early 1950s with a collection of Jewish parodies of Broadway musicals. Already accustomed to the LP format, Sherman adhered to a practice of heavily Jewish musical comedy. Due to this style, earlier reviewers believed that Sherman's audience, like Mickey Katz's, would remain strictly Jewish and estimated that sales would only flourish in large cities.[215] These reviewers, however, failed to detect Sherman's comic divergence from the Milton Berles and Mickey Katzs of the 1950s Yiddish comic resistance. Sherman's voice and dialogue, though full of references to Jewish culture, "offered no Yiddish, no dialect accents, no uproarious klezmer."[216] Like Brooks and Reiner, Sherman enhanced the linguistic accessibility of his Jewish comedy. Though Sherman sang his comedy like his Yiddish contemporaries, he knocked off popular tunes such as "When

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[213] Dauber, *Jewish Comedy*, 161.
[214] Larry Siegal, "Interview with Mel Brooks," *Playboy*, 1966.
[215] Mark Cohen, "My Fair Sadie," 55
[216] Kun, "The Yiddish Are Coming," 353.

the Saints Go Marching In" and the musical reprise from "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain" instead of using ethnic Jewish music.[217] Therefore, non-Jewish audiences, even when confronted with unfamiliar Jewish references, would encounter recognizable music. In order to sing along or remember Sherman's work, they only needed to relearn the words. Sherman "Yiddishized" various facets of American popular culture without making this re-"Yiddishization" inaccessible to Christian audiences.

In terms of content, Sherman's parodies reflected the changing social world around him through the lens of a relatable, Jewish "everyman." In his biography of Sherman, journalist Mark Cohen observed how Sherman manipulated the Jewish experience and established it as a "hallmark… of national trends."[218] Selections from his renowned albums, *My Son, The Folk Singer,* and *My Son, the Nut,* provided evidence for this unique skill. His parody of "Frere Jacques," renamed "Sarah Jackman," included the lyrical exchange, "How's your cousin Ida?...She's a freedom rider."[219] This seemingly throwaway dialogue, reflected the active role of Jewish women in the Civil Rights movements.[220] The line's ability to concurrently engage with a folk song, a mainstream facet of American culture, and a pressing movement in America's counterculture encompassed the appeal of the album. Another track, entitled, *Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh,* detailed the long-winded, unfocused, complaints of a child at summer camp. Inspired by Sherman's personal experiences as a camp counselor at Jewish sports camp, the song soared to fame overnight. Parents across the United States, regardless of religion, found familiarity in the child's dramatic grievances and complete distraction throughout the song.[221]

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[217] Allan Sherman, *My Son, The Folk Singer,* Warner Bros. Records, 1962, Vinyl.
[218] Mark Cohen, *Overweight Sensation: the Life and Comedy of Allen Sherman*, (Walthum: Brandeis University Press, 2013), 141.
[219] Sherman, *My Son, The Folk Singer.*
[220] Debra L. Schultz, "Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement," in *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader,* ed. Pamela S. Nadell, (New York City, New York University Press, 2003), 282.
[221] Allan Sherman, *My Son, The Nut,* Warner Bros. Records, 1963, Vinyl.

By using composer Amilcare Ponchielli's *Dance of the Hours*, a familiar instrumental piece as the underlying tune, Sherman enhanced the song's sonic catchiness.[222] Audiences already knew the tune and did not need to relearn the words. This song's national success ensured Sherman's enduring legacy.

Though Sherman's early work in the 1950s found little popular success, like the phenomenon of *2000 Years with Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks*, this merely reflected the innovative nature of his work. The familiarity of Sherman's musical quips guaranteed his success. By 1963, three of his albums climbed to the top of *Billboard's* Top 100 chart.[223] Audiences, regardless of religion, resonated with his teasing of the both serious and trivial social realties in the 1960s. Mark Cohen compared the universal appeal of Allen Sherman to the widespread popularity of *Fiddler on the Roof.* Sherman, like Tevye, made "being Jewish familiar and fun" through jokes about universal complaints.[224] By parodying current events and relatable family dynamics through the voices of Jewish characters, Sherman made significant contributions to the "Yiddishization" of American comedy.

As pioneers in the "Yiddishization" of mainstream comedy, Brooks, Reiner, and Sherman established a cultural and technological foundation for future efforts among other Jewish comedians. Over the rest of the decade, comedians such as Dan Greenburg, Bob Booker, George Foster, and Don Rickles integrated the successful quips of their forerunners into their own albums. In 1964, Dan Greenburg and Gertrude Berg released a comedy LP based off of Greenburg's best-selling book, *How to be a Jewish Mother: A Very Lovely Training Manual*. In this album, the familiar voice of Gertrude Berg outlined the basic techniques of Jewish

[222] Cohen, *Overweight Sensation*, 172
[223] Billboard Top 200, 1963.
[224] Mark Cohen, *Overweight Sensation*, 206

motherhood, ranging from food distribution to guilt control, mocking and simultaneously flaunting the stereotypes associated with American Jewish mothers.[225] This practice proved reminiscent of earlier jokes by Brooks and Reiner. In 1965, comedians Bob Booker and George Foster released the record *You Don't Have to be Jewish*, and its sequel, *When You're in Love, the Whole World is Jewish*, attempting "an album version of *Fiddler on the Roof-type* stories."[226] Recognizing the success of this musical, they sought to implement a similar universally appealing portrayal of Judaism in their own comic works. Their parodies of Long Island Jewish mothers and Jewish anxiety also mimicked the earlier efforts of Brooks, Reiner, and Sherman.[227] Indeed, countless other comedy albums, ranging from *Funny, You Don't Look it, Or (How can you say the World isn't Jewish when the Sun's name is Sol* (1968) to Don Rickles' *Hello Dummy* (1969), parodied aspects of Jewish life that other comedians had already proven would appeal to all American audiences.

While pioneers in mainstream Jewish comedy such as Brooks and Sherman recognized the specific alterations that Jewish humor required both in medium and stylistic content, the Jewish comedians that followed merely copied their tactics. Embedding Jewish lingo or content within comedy became a comedian's supposed recipe for success in Markfield's environment of "Yiddishized" American humor. Regardless of these varying inspirations, the regularity of Jewish expression in various entertainment platforms and particularly comedy contributed to the development of widespread ethnic Jewish pride in the United States. With the establishment of unashamedly Jewish humor in American popular culture, it became a safer medium for memorial Holocaust content.

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[225] Dan Greenburg and Gertrude Berg, *How to be a Jewish Mother*, Price.Stern.Sloan, 1964, Vinyl.
[226] Bob Booker and George Foster, You Don't Have to be Jewish, Kapp Records, 1965, Vinyl.
[227] Ibid.

Memorializing the Holocaust Through Humor:

Though the 1960s did not accommodate the popularization of the Holocaust in American comedy, the decade's "Yiddishized" culture facilitated the tragedy's introduction into mainstream comic content.[228] While Lenny Bruce's earlier comic portrayal of the Holocaust reveled in its dual ability to shock audiences and eschew social and political criticism, Jewish comedians in the 1960s were stimulated by the growing contemporary relevance of the Holocaust. Though earlier vital conversations on the Holocaust paved the way to its budding significance in the 1960s, American Jewish historians credit events such as the publication of the *Diary of Anne Frank* and the Eichmann Trials with only ephemeral resurgences of the Holocaust in public dialogue.[229] Popular efforts to memorialize the Holocaust required not only specific trials or publications, but also a general shift in American attitudes towards ethnic and racial self-expression. The 1960s yielded that greater change.

By the 1960s, a growing emphasis on ethnic pride among minority populations in the United States allowed the commemoration of the Holocaust to become a far more unified effort among American Jews and the general American population.[230] The memory of the Holocaust actively encouraged young American Jewish citizens to embrace their newfound privilege and take on active roles in the American Civil Rights movement. Individual survivors who immigrated to the United States interpreted Civil Rights efforts as an opportunity to assume savior roles that non-Jewish bystanders did not embrace in the few years prior to the Holocaust.[231] The immediate danger faced by the newfound state of Israel during the Six-Day-

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[228] Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America,* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 4.
[229] Diner, *A New Promised Land*, 127.
[230] Diner, *We Remember*, 372.
[231] Schultz, "Going South," 281.

War of 1967 forced even American Jews to recognize, once again, their precarious condition.[232] While Western countries terminated their diplomatic relations with Israel and Arab countries in the Middle East threatened to cease oil sales to the Israeli-allied United States, Jews felt increasingly alone both in the United States and in international politics. The Holocaust became the Jewish reminder of the potential consequences Jews could face without the security of a home-land and international support.[233]

The relevance of the Holocaust also began to permeate conversations outside the Jewish community. Rhetoric and terminology traditionally associated with the Holocaust began to bleed into contemporary discussions regarding gender, race, and war.[234] For both the American Jewish community and the liberalizing American culture of the 1960s, Holocaust memorialization became vital to the maintenance of social justice.[235] Academics and protestors began to apply the narrative of the Holocaust to the Vietnam War, nuclear proliferation, and America's racist social infrastructure.[236] The Holocaust's relevance required its preservation as a significant historical event. Though these efforts at memorialization did not reach their pinnacle until the 1970s, by the end of the 1960s such preservationist attempts expedited the presence of the Holocaust in the world of comedy.

According to Kaufmann, the first efforts to integrate Holocaust memorialization into entertainment culture did not begin in the field of comedy, but in literature.[237] Indeed, the mainstream publications discussed earlier in this chapter began to feature not only the Jewish identity, but also the resurgence of Holocaust consciousness. In 1960, Elie Wiesel published his

[232] Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture,* 15.
[233] Diner, *A New Promised Land,* 127.
[234] Elle Wiesel, *One Generation After,* (New York City: Random House, 1970), 182.
[235] Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film,* 88
[236] Ibid.
[237] Kaufmann, *Jewhooing,* 33.

English translation of his memoir, *Night*. As a short and accessible memoir with the resonance of a bildungsroman, it proved a popular and suitable continuation of the attributes that once secured The Diary of Anne Frank its success.[238] In 1964, Philip Roth sustained the growing presence of the Holocaust in literature through his short story, "Eli, the Fanatic" from *Goodbye Columbus.* It portrayed a young Jewish boy's inability to grapple with questions regarding the Holocaust in the context of 1950s suburban America. By placing the story amongst others narratives dedicated to exploring the relevance of American counterculture, Roth made the Holocaust relevant to the general culture of the 1960s.[239] As both Jewish and non-Jewish pioneers in Holocaust memorialization began to embed the tragedy in museum exhibitions, literature, film and musical theater, comedy allowed America's plethora of Jewish humorists to also engage in such remembrance.

In the 1960s, the television program *Hogan's Heroes* and Mel Brook's film, *The Producers* reflected the initial efforts of Jewish comedians to memorialize the Holocaust by openly mocking the Nazis in a nationally appealing manner. Their novelty subsisted not only in their content, but also the willingness of their creators to openly discuss the Holocaust as their chief inspiration. Though Sid Caesar jeered at German culture in early work, history contains little affirmation that this ridicule stemmed from an active attempt to seek vengeance on Nazis. The "Yiddishization" of American humor allowed Jewish comedians to openly admit to the roots of their Nazi mockery.[240] In the 1950s, the Holocaust reminded Jewish Americans that they were outsiders. But by the 1960s, as Jewish comedians capitalized off of their liminal status, that reminder became far less threatening to Jewish Americans.

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[238] Mintz, *Popular Culture,* 21.
[239] Roth, *Goodbye Columbus,* 247.
[240] Fermaglich, "The Producers*,"* 68.

The chosen technological platform of these comic productions also played a vital role in their ability to integrate the Holocaust into mainstream entertainment. Though televisions initially thrived in urban environments, by the 1960s, suburbanization allowed large numbers of Americans to simultaneously absorb identical content. Earlier in the century, radio had offered a similar experience. Television, as a visual and aural medium, further augmented the collective nature of entertainment.[241] In her study on the Holocaust in American film, film scholar Judith E. Doneson brands film and television as influential elements in shaping collective perceptions in the United States of a particular event.[242] She credits film and television with the ability to "revive" memory and educate masses. Indeed, famed and nationally affecting examples of the Holocaust in American Jewish humor throughout the 1960s most popularly persisted in film and television rather than stand-up. The recordable and far-reaching nature of television allowed the medium to function in the same manner as monuments, as they became corporeal and lasting memorials to the memory of the Holocaust.

Doneson's analysis on the relevance of film and television in the distribution of the Holocaust narrative aligned with the first successful comic depiction of Nazi atrocities in mainstream American comedy. In 1965, Jewish creators Bernard Fein and Albert S. Ruddy's television program, *Hogan's Heroes,* premiered on leading television network CBS. This six-season program followed the capture of five Allied soldiers imprisoned in a Nazi POW camp. This state of captivity allowed the servicemen to work as agents behind enemy lines.[243] Though *Hogan's Heroes* did not directly address the Holocaust, the series pushed the boundaries of addressing the topic on American television by toying with a setting that resembled the tragedy.

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[241] Epstein, *Haunted Smile,* 135.
[242] Doneson, Holocaust in American film, 4.
[243] *Hogan Heroes.* Produced by Edward H. Feldman, Written by Bernard Fein and Albert S. Ruddy. CBS Productions, 1965.

Indeed, upon the show's premier, many viewers confused the location for a concentration camp.[244] In his cultural evaluation, Jon Stratton argues that the presence of the Holocaust in *Hogan's Heroes* persisted through this misperceived setting of a POW camp. He labeled the POW camp, Stalag 13, as a "neurotic displacement for a concentration camp."[245] The show packaged the experiences of the Holocaust into a far more digestible vehicle for mainstream audiences, acclimating American audiences to the tragedy's horrors without completely alienating them.

Though often criticized for its tastelessness, *Hogan's Heroes* boasted a team of Jewish actors, writers, and directors that openly and unquestionably engaged in a comic portrayal of World War II at the cost of the Nazis. Its cast members included a Holocaust survivor and several Jewish men whose families fled Germany in the mid-1930s. These actors had experienced the consequences of the Holocaust in their personal lives and wove these experiences into their acting. Holocaust survivor Robert Clary who played one of the show's protagonists, fondly recalled the opportunity to "[make] fools of [his] captors."[246] He recalled other members of the production team, ranging from writers to actors, shared this sentiment. Werner Klemperer, famous for portraying one of the Nazi antagonists affirmed, "I had one qualification when I took the job: if they ever wrote a segment whereby Colonel Klink would come out the hero, I would leave the show."[247] In the 1960s, Klemperer had few qualms directly communicating that his portrayal of a Nazi would depend on his ability to mock and ridicule the

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[244] Jeffrey Shandler. *While America watches: Televising the holocaust*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 143.
[245] Jon Stratton. "Haunted by the Holocaust: *Hogan's Heroes, The Producers, Fiddler on the Roof*," *Journal for Cultural Research*, 22, no.3, 246.
[246] Robert Clary, *From the Holocaust to Hogan's Heroes: The Autobiography of Robert Clary,* (Maryland: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2001), 172.
[247] Bernard Weinraub, "Werner Klemperer, Klink in Hogan's Heroes Dies at 80," *New York Times*, December 8, 2000. https://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/08/arts/werner-klemperer-klink-in-hogan-s-heroes-dies-at-80.html.

Nazis. The son of German Jewish conductor Otto Klemperer, Werner Klemperer and his family fled Germany shortly after Hitler's rise to the power. As an escapee from the Weimar Republic, Klemperer personally experienced the early stages of the Holocaust. Memories of this migration influenced his performance.[248] By portraying the Nazis as inept fools incapable of running the POW camp, the creators and actors of *Hogan's Heroes* memorialized their personal experiences of the Holocaust.

The 1968 premiere of Mel Brooks' renowned film, *The Producers,* was another seminal event in comic Holocaust memorialization. The motion picture followed two struggling Broadway producers, Bialystok and Bloom, who try to purposefully flop a musical for the insurance money. After very little deliberation, the two decide that a controversial musical on Hitler would yield this inevitable failure.[249] Like *Hogan's Heroes,* the film did not directly refer to the Holocaust. Because the term "Jew" never appeared in the script of *The Producers,* some scholars interpreted the film in the same manner as Bruce's work, as a veiled criticism of the American middle class. This interpretation, however, contradicted the affirmations of contemporary reviews and the film's writer and director. Both Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder, the film's leading actors, were of Jewish descent and Mostel originated the role of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* on Broadway. Reviewers in the 1960s understood that the two main protagonists were Jewish, as the pair performed Jewish stereotypes of neuroticism, miserly behavior, and masculine frailty.[250] With this Hitler-centered plot, Nazis and World War II prominently permeated the film. The narrative featured a Hitler obsessed lunatic Nazi, a musical number adorned with swastikas and tap-dancing Nazis, and a telegram review of the producers'

[248] Stratton, "Haunted by the Holocaust," 250.
[249] *The Producers,* Directed by Mel Brooks, Los Angeles: Embassy Pictures, 1967.
[250] Fermaglich, "The Producers," 66.

musical that read “"Congratulations! Hitler will run forever.”[251] The emphasis on the term “forever” symbolized Brook’s ironic intentions for the film’s portrayal of Nazis. Ten years after the film’s premiere, Brooks stated, “If I [got] on the soapbox and [waxed] eloquently, it [would be] blown away in the wind, but if I do Springtime for Hitler it'll never be forgotten.”[252] Though Brook’s apparent goal in the film consisted of mocking of Nazis, his desire for his audiences to remember and realize the event that inspired this comic practice remained critical.

Like the makers of *Hogan’s Heroes,* Brooks openly discussed the memorializing and cathartic purpose of the film long before and during the film’s production. In the 1950s, Brooks, as a writer on Sid Caesar’s *Your Show of Shows,* stirred controversy in the writers room when he proposed that Caesar portray foolish German characters. Even in the early 1960s, Hollywood agencies did not take to his well-defined intentions lightly. Brooks’ script did not initially fare well among directors or producers. They either rejected the idea completely or suggested that Brooks lighten its harsh plot by replacing Hitler with Mussolini.[253] Brooks eventually shed its original title *Springtime for Hitler* and replaced it with the far less controversial *The Producers*. Even without its original title, *The Producers* embodied Brooks’ first clearly identified and popularly successful effort to transform Nazis from objects of fear into lasting articles of ridicule.[254] Though the anti-Semitic crimes of the Germans that inspired Brooks’ hatred remain absent in his content, they were well-defined in dozens of interviews that followed the controversial premiere of the film. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Brooks labeled

[251] *The Producers,* Brooks.
[252] Fermaglich, “The Producers,” 67.
[253] Dauber, *Jewish Comedy,* 164
[254] Dorinson, *Kvetching and Shpritzing,* 87.

his comic portrayal of Hitler as the "ultimate triumph for the free spirit."[255] In another, Brooks unmistakably confessed:

> "Me? Not like the Germans? Why should I not like Germans? Just because they're arrogant and have fat necks and do anything they're told so long as it's cruel, and killed millions of Jews in concentrations camps and made soap out of their bodies and lamp shades out of their skins? Is that any reason to hate their fucking guts?[256]

This passionate declaration addressed the Holocaust gaps in his film. Though Brooks could not find a means into integrate the Holocaust itself in his film, only his anger with Nazis, this interview allowed him to express not only his anger but the circumstances that fueled them. *The Producers* partook in the mocking of Germans and Nazis of its comic predecessors, however, Brooks distinguished his work with a clear confession of his intention for his Nazi-mocking humor to persist throughout the decades to come.

Hogan's Heroes and *The Producers* premiered to an audience well-adjusted to the manifestation of Jewish content and language in mainstream comedy, popular film and literature alike. Though their Holocaust humor did not symbolize a trend, the two comic productions reflected the first successful efforts to integrate this tragic Jewish experience within the larger context of "Yiddishized" Jewish comedy. Additionally, Brooks and *Hogan's Heroes* paved a course for comedians to contribute to contemporary dialogue on the Holocaust through their personal cultural practice. This method involved the tempered, yet clearly antagonistic mocking of Nazis. The Holocaust itself remained absent from the artistic content, but it an obvious aspect of the public dialogue surrounding these productions. Jewish writers, performers, and producers cited the Holocaust as the primary influence in their Nazi-hostile work. This practice diverged from the Nazi jeering embraced by Sid Caesar or Lenny Bruce who did not publicly cite the

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[255] Champlin, Charles. "Mel Brooks Talks about New Film." *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995),* Mar 08, 1968.
[256] Dorinson, *Kvetching and Shpritzing,* 87.

Holocaust as an integral inspiration for their work. Like Sid Caesar though, both *Hogan's Heroes* and Brooks never made the cruelties experienced by the Jewish people during Holocaust the epicenter of their humor; only Nazis were the butt of the joke. In a 2016 documentary Brooks specifically lauded the mocking of Nazis but critiqued any humorizing of the genocide of the Jewish people.[257] But even the seemingly simple action of mocking Nazis permitted Brooks and *Hogan's Heroes* to brand Nazis as the butt of their jokes, and therefore to transmit the brand of the victim back upon their enemies. By displaying that process through television and film, they memorialized these efforts.

Conclusion:

Markfield's observation regarding the "Yiddishization" of American humor, though potentially hyperbolic, represented a trend that pervaded various aspects of American culture and entertainment, as well as humor. As the various social and political movement of the 1960s began to normalize ethnic diversity and chip away at the assimilative tendencies of the 1950s, American entertainment experienced a similar pattern. Though academia, musical theater, and literature pioneered these efforts, the introduction of Jewish characters, settings, and linguistics eventually permeated comedy as well. The Holocaust became a vital topic particularly in comedy, as it represented a subject that did not fit in to the rigid content approved for mainstream audiences in the 1950s. Though previous chapters clearly demonstrated that the 1960s did not represent the dawn of the Holocaust in American comedy, this section highlights its introduction in popular comedy. Mel Brooks' and *Hogan's Heroes* mainstream success set a precedent for memorializing the Holocaust through humor. In the 1960s, these comedians remained vital to the history of Jewish comedy because they understood how to transform

[257] *The Last Laugh*, Directed by Ferne Pearlstein, New York: Tangerine Entertainment, 2016.

general Jewish humor and eventually references to World War II and the Holocaust into content that might genuinely appeal to all American audiences. Simultaneously, their comic portrayal of Nazis allowed these comedians to contribute to the growing movement to memorialize the Holocaust after the internationally shocking proceedings of The Six Day War. Embedding the Holocaust, through a comic jeering of Nazis, into film and television allowed comedians to properly honor the memory of Jews who perished in the Holocaust by using the comic devises at their disposal.

Epilogue:

On November 4th 2017, Jewish comedian Larry David hosted the American sketch comedy television program, *Saturday Night Live*. David made national news the following morning not for his comic genius, but for a controversial Holocaust joke.[258] In his opening monologue the night before, after mocking the homeless and the blind in his typical boundary pushing manner, Larry David had said:

> "I've always, always, been obsessed with women, and I've often wondered — if I'd grown up in Poland when Hitler came to power and was sent to a concentration camp, would I still be checking out women in the camp? Ehh Shlomo Shlomo, look at that one over there by Barracks 8."

Already met with an amalgamation of gasps and laughs, David had proceeded to contribute examples of concentration camps pickup lines, such as "You know, 'if we ever get out of here, I'd love to take you out for some latkes. You like latkes?,' and "What? What did I say? Is it me, or is it the whole thing? It's because I'm bald, isn't it?"[259] To the dismay of several critics, David augmented the solemn Jewish experience of the Holocaust with comic flirting.[260] Though David had previously engaged with Holocaust humor in his television programs *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm,* Jewish and non-Jewish voices alike began to debate David's joke, contemplating the comedian's Jewish heritage and the quip's stylistic caliber. This modern cultural debate revealed that though Holocaust humor persisted and evolved throughout the late 20th century, with each new development the topic's contentious clout remained.

In the fifty years between the 1967 premiere of *The Producers* and Larry David's 2017 SNL monologue, the Holocaust maintained its presence in various facets of American

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[258] Avi Selk, "The Debate Over Larry David's Holocaust Joke on SNL: Bad Taste or Just Bad Comedy," *The Washington Post*, November 5, 2017.
[259] *Saturday Night Live*, "Episode 833," Created by Lorne Michaels. New York City: NBC Network. November 4, 2017.
[260] Selk, "The Debate."

entertainment, academia, and political rhetoric. In particular, the practice of Holocaust memorialization became a national movement across various cultural platforms. The 1973 Yom Kippur War, which further fueled international conflation of anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism, enhanced Jewish apprehension towards the latter. Yet, in a social contrast to this international unease, American Jews were more integrated into the white middle class than ever before.[261] Hoping to address these fears within a socially secure atmosphere, Jewish Americans campaigned for Holocaust remembrance to rise to the forefront of representation in film, education, and politics. Indeed, by in the 1980s, the American federal government established a committee to memorialize the Holocaust, NBC broadcast its seminal miniseries, *Holocaust*, and Congress voted to establish the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC.[262] The Holocaust became a vital topic in mainstream academic and political discourse, intertwining American Jewish identity in its rhetoric. The international popularity of the *Holocaust* miniseries encouraged other artists to memorialize the tragedy though visual culture.[263] These efforts in non-comedic entertainment culminated with the 1993 premiere of Steven Spielberg's internationally renowned *Schindler's List*. Like Larry David's joke, however, Holocaust memorialization did not persist uncontested. Even the seemingly "happy ending" efforts of cultural, academic, and political remembrance provoked controversy.[264]

International scrutiny of Israeli policy paired with the development of Holocaust memorialization generated contestation among both non-Jewish and Jewish communities. Perhaps the most controversial development was the birth of "Holocaust denial " movements.

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[261] Diner, *A New Promised Land*, 124.
[262] Mintz, *Popular Culture*, 23,
[263] Doneson, *Holocaust in American Film*, 154
[264] Anson Rabinbach. "From Explosion to Erosion: Holocaust Memorialization in America since Bitburg." *History and Memory* 9, no. 1/2 (1997): 228.

Contemporaneously with the aforementioned advent in Holocaust memorialization in the 1970s, Holocaust denial became an "academic enterprise."[265] Rhetoric denying or minimizing the Holocaust appeared in the expressions of American and European far-right politicians, such as David Duke and Jean Marie Le Pen, and in several publications from the Palestinian Liberation Organization.[266] Negative attitudes towards memorialization appeared even among members of the American Jewish community. In the 1990s, spokespersons began to express hesitation towards the Americanization of Holocaust memorials, believing these museums and monuments served as platforms for the United States to exaggerate American involvement during Holocaust liberation. Some Jewish community leaders voiced fear that politicized and nationalized Holocaust memorials would alter the public's perception of the tragedy's reality.[267] These controversies, like memorialization itself, eventually found its own practice in the realm of American Jewish comedians.

As one of the few comic voices in Holocaust memorialization, even decades after the premiere of *The Producers*, Mel Brooks boasted an ever-increasing audience. By the end of the 20th century, Mel Brooks' efforts to establish his own comedy as a platform for Holocaust remembrance had almost succeeded. *The Producers*, once considered controversial and artistically audacious, became the "Rocky Horror Picture Show for Jews."[268] Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Brooks continued to integrate the trope of Nazi-mocking in his films. His 1981 film, *History of the World Part I,* featured a short quip titled, "Hitler on Ice," and in 1983 Brooks directed and starred in a remake of Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be*.[269] Other films

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[265] Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. (New York City: Free Press, 1993), 10.
[266] Ibid., 12.
[267] Rabinach, "Explosion to Erosion," 228.
[268] Fermaglich, "The Producers," 78.
[269] *History of the World Part I.* Directed by Mel Brooks. Los Angeles: Brooksfilms, 1981; *To Not to Be.* Directed by Mel Brooks. Los Angeles: Brooksfilms, 1983.

and directors that jeered at Nazis also began to grace the entertainment world, though their films often remained confined to the realm of B-list movies.[270] By 2001, *The Producers* had earned a spot on the Broadway stage.[271] The musical's 21st century premiere caused far less controversy, as it encountered an American audience more familiar with Holocaust rhetoric and a Jewish audience far more comfortable with its status in the United States. In this revival, gay pride became more central to the plot, adding an additional focal point to the original production's sole focus on Jewish pride.[272] Because Brooks' films and productions only presented variations on the long-accepted practice of mocking Nazis, as opposed to referring to the Jewish experience during the Holocaust, they received more acclaim than criticism.

In response to the growing acceptance of Brooks' comic methodology, modern Jewish and for the first time, non-Jewish American comedians developed new methods to joke about the Holocaust that did not predicate on mocking Nazis. Larry David's renowned *Seinfeld* adopted Brook's method of Nazi jeering, as it featured its protagonists' comic encounters with outlandish neo-Nazis and the infamous Soup Nazi. However, when the episode "The Raincoats" included Jerry Seinfeld making-out with his date at a showing of *Schindler's List*, David verged on new territory.[273] Because the former scenarios largely resembled Brooks' more established work, they stirred little notice in contemporary reviews. The latter, presented a new scenario, by presenting a character openly willing to disrespect a solemn film documenting the tragedy. Indeed, when writing about the show's legacy in 1998, *Washington Post* film critic Tom Shales still recalled this particular joke as "tasteless" and emblematic of the show's immoral treatment

[270] *They Saved Hitler's Brain.* Directed by David Bradley. Los Angeles: Paragon Films, 1968.
[271] Fermaglich, "The Producers," 77
[272] Ibid.
[273] *Seinfeld.* "The Raincoats." Directed by Tom Cherons. Created by Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David. New York City: NBC, April 28, 1994.

of the Holocaust.[274] Jewish comedians who diverged from Brooks' accepted practice of Holocaust humor provoked new debates and disapproval.

The contentious evolution of Holocaust humor reemerged less than a year after *Seinfeld* left prime network television. In 1997, Italian director Roberto Benigni released his controversial Holocaust comedy, *Life is Beautiful.* Unlike his comic predecessors, Benigni was neither Jewish nor made mocking Nazis his primary goal. Dedicating the film to his Jewish wife, Benigni centered the plot around the experience of a goofy father imprisoned in a concentration camp with his son. Yet, instead of accepting his fate, Benigni's character remained determined to convince his son that their prison and its Nazi guards were merely an amusing game. Benigni satiated the film with not only slapstick and Nazi jeering, but also a comic alleviation of the camp's horrors.[275] Though not representative of American Jewish comedy—*Life is Beautiful* was produced in Italy—the film's prevalence in American Jewish dialogue tied its fate to the narrative of Holocaust humor in the United States. The film's experimental humor did not bode well among many American Jewish entertainers and critics. Though some lauded the film for its creativity, many reviewers accused Benigni of misrepresenting the Holocaust for the sake of humor.[276] Film scholar Maurizio Viano, however, noted that the poor reviews were often printed in supposedly "high-brow" medias, such as *The New Yorker*, while more popular newspapers, such as *The New York Times,* praised the film.[277] These mixed reviews echoed the reception that *The Producers* once received. Though Mel Brooks himself hated the film, Benigni's project built on Brooks' own efforts in comic

[274]Tom Shales. "So Long 'Seinfeld,' Let Me Show You the Door," *The Washington Post,* April 16, 1998.
[275] *Life is Beautiful*. Directed by Roberto Benigni. Florence, Melampo Cinematografica, 1997.
[276] Maurizio Sanzio Viano. "Life is Beautiful: Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter." *Jewish Social Studies* 5, no. 3 (1999): 48.
[277] Ibid.

memorialization, as *Life is Beautiful* "[re-inscribed the Holocaust] in the collective memory through an unusual code."[278] Viano's references to collective memory and code evoke academic analyses of Brooks' comic remembrance of the Holocaust. Benigni's film, though inciting controversy, developed the existing mainstream presence of Holocaust dialogue and Brooks' contemporaneously singular efforts at embedding that rhetoric within comedy.

While these films represented distinct modifications and changing receptions, over the last ten years, according to a recently released chapter penned by Jewish Studies scholar David Slucki, Holocaust-related humor has become "pedestrian."[279] As technological platforms suited to expressing humor increased, the ubiquity of comic Holocaust references surged as well, to which academics could rarely ascribe a singular purpose. Though some entertainers truly aligned themselves with the memorialization practices of Benigni and Brooks, others reverted to the politicized performances of Lenny Bruce or fashioned completely novel comic methodology. Philosopher Lissa Skitolsky discusses several examples of these differing intentions. She argues that Sarah Silverman's Holocaust comedy called the hierarchy of human suffering into question, as it sought to comically relate the tragedy to racist dialogue in the United States.[280] Skitosky also references an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, in which a Jewish pedestrian critiqued Larry David's character for whistling a melody penned by Wagner, a prominent anti-Semite whose music played in Nazi concentration camps. The humorous encounter mirrored the irrationality of Jews dictating to other Jews how they must commemorate the Holocaust.[281] Indeed at times, critics erroneously began to assign adverse intent to modern examples of

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[278] Ibid., 50.
[279] David Slucki. "'Did You Ever See Our Show? Holocaust Comedy in American Sitcoms." *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust.* Ed. David Slucki, Avinoam Patt, Gabriel N. Finder. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020).
[280] Lissa Skitolsky. "Holocaust Humor and Our Aesthetic Sensibility of American Genocide*." The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticsm* 77, no. 4: 502.
[281] Ibid., 509.

Holocaust humor. Early reviews condemned Taika Waititi's *Jojo Rabbit* for "kicking a dead bull" through its comic presentation of Nazis.[282] However, upon a more widespread release, and Waititi's classification of the film as an "anti-hate" production, critics rebranded his work as reflective of the international upsurge in racial and ethnic violent crime.[283] Though often inciting controversy and inaccurate interpretations, the normalization of Holocaust humor allowed comedians to sow distinctive intention within their respective embodiments of the topic.

This ubiquity has led to not only mislabeled intent, but has also allowed internet users and even inanimate products to co-opt the Holocaust as a marker of daring or audacious humor. Communications scholar Gemma Commane conducted a preliminary study that analyzed the recent phenomena of "memes" and "hashtags" as platforms for both disrespecting and memorializing the Holocaust. The memes that often utilized the Holocaust in a humorous context reflected a "narcissistic" effort among teens to garner more likes and shares.[284] These references permeated even pre-teen recreation. Predicated on its ability to engage with edgy humor, a basic set of the infamous adolescent card game, *Cards Against Humanity*, contained four cards, including "Auschwitz" to "Poorly-timed Holocaust jokes," that undeniably reference the Holocaust.[285] A teenager's ability to engage with the Holocaust in this Apples-to-Apples style creative comedy further normalized the topic's ever-growing presence in American humor. As internet platforms, such as Twitter to TikTok, provide individuals with a platform to function as their own comedian, the intent of and controversy associated with Holocaust humor becomes more difficult to isolate and analyze.

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[282] Richard Brody, "Springtime for Nazis, How the Satire of 'Jojo Rabbit' Backfires," *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2019.
[283] Masha Gessen, "'Jojo Rabbit' Captures the Horror and Absurdity of Our Trumpian Movement," *The New Yorker*, January 7, 2020.
[284] Gemma Commane, "Instagram and Auschwitz: a critical assessment of the impact social media has on Holocaust representation," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal on Culture and History* 25, no. 1-2, 2018: 162.
[285] *Cards Against Humanity.* Designed by Ben Hatoot and Max Temkin. May 2011.

While the current pervasiveness of Holocaust humor complicates the tragedy's recent comic legacy, its initial presence in mainstream comedy between the 1950s and 1960s offers scholars an insight on the historical circumstances and individual agency required to depict a tragedy in a humorous context. By integrating interdisciplinary academic work on Jewish comedy with the recent redevelopment of Holocaust memorialization history, my work reveals the Holocaust's multifaceted and evolving role in American Jewish comedy. The novelty of Holocaust humor in the United States between 1945 and 1970 allowed it to evolve with and respond to shifting social and political circumstances. However, even this delineated relationship between Holocaust humor and American history requires greater scrutiny. In comic rhetoric, the Holocaust did not chronologically fluctuate between absence and presence. The Holocaust did not play a singular role nor indicate a particular symbol. For some Jewish comedians, the Holocaust was a comic agent and for others, a passive platform. And the modern omnipresence of Holocaust humor often deprives the tragedy of any deeper meaning. Though the role and reception of Holocaust humor gained complexity with every decade, its true function depended not only on contemporaneous cultural and social conditions, but also the comedian and his or her chosen technological and methodological platform. The significance of Holocaust humor, even when analyzed in a span of twenty-five years, rarely fits a singular model. To mold this comic practice to a pervasive paradigm, discredits individual comedians and their often varying intentions.

This thesis forces academics to apply a multi-faceted and earnest outlook to comic depictions of tragedy. Various humorous representations of the Holocaust by Jewish comedians illustrate that tragedy can carry meaning in its absence. Its symbolism can endure in its ability to pass political criticism or function as a form of remembrance, allowing memorialization to

transcend its traditional association with merely monuments or memoirs. Holocaust humor's seemingly unavoidable relationship with controversy forces academics to question whether notoriety entails immorality. While each individual humorous depiction of tragedy requires analysis, this thesis establishes tragi-comedy as a subject worthy of that academic scrutiny.

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